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# METAL HAMMER



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The inside story  
of Vice Grip

## KILLSWITCH ENGAGE

Jesse: "My dad  
smashed my  
Number Of The  
Beast tape"

## LACUNA COIL

30 years of  
tragedy and  
triumph

## WARDRUNA

Can Einar survive  
in the wild?



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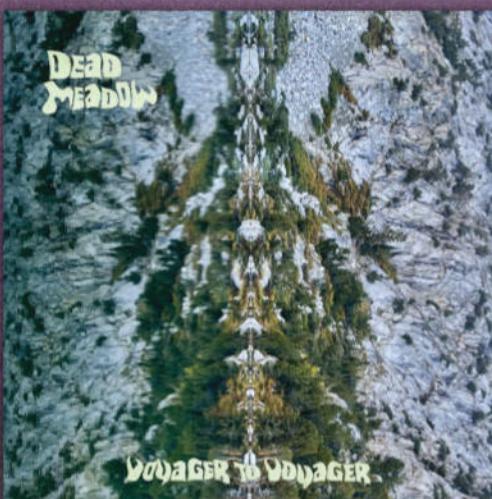
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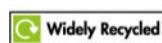
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## ON THE CREST OF A WAVE

HYPE HAD SLOWLY been building for Spiritbox, who'd been plugging away from their home in Canada's Vancouver Island, but the release of *Holy Roller* in 2020 changed everything. With its relentless groove, Courtney LaPlante's unapologetic screams and *that Midsommar*-inspired video, it set the standard for modern metalcore. It also set expectations for their debut album, *Eternal Blue*, the following year, and, following its success, the band have collaborated with mainstream rapper Megan Thee Stallion and played stadiums with the likes of Korn and Bring Me The Horizon.

With second album *Tsunami Sea* about to drop, not to mention a stadium tour with the new incarnation of Linkin Park this summer, our Dannii Leivers spoke to Spiritbox about how their lives have changed, and what we can expect from their new music. Clue: in co-founder/guitarist Mike Stringer's words, it's "hilariously heavy". We can't wait to see them level London's Ally Pally later this month.

Elsewhere in the mag, we investigate Limp Bizkit's rising popularity (aka the 'Durstnaissance'), and take Wardruna mastermind Einar foraging in a graveyard. Because why not?

Stay metal,



**ELEANOR GOODMAN**  
 EDITOR

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## MEET THE BAND



**DEREK BREMNER**  
 PHOTOGRAPHER

We sent Del to an East End graveyard to go foraging with Wardruna's Einar Selvik, and he came back with these absolutely gorgeous portraits (p.58). However, he didn't drink Einar's nettle and hummingbird nectar smoothie. Coward!



**VANESSA THORPE**  
 PRODUCTION EDITOR

As well as keeping Team Hammer on track, Vanessa will be running the London Marathon in April for Breakthrough T1D, a charity funding developments and treatments for Type 1 diabetes. See more at: [tinyurl.com/vanessamarathon](http://tinyurl.com/vanessamarathon)



**KATJA OGRIN**  
 PHOTOGRAPHER

Katja lives in Birmingham with her three black cats, and has shot everyone from rock stars to ballet dancers. We're in awe of her talent – just look at her stunning Slipknot photos on page 98. A leaping Tortilla! A wild Corey Taylor!



10 AVANTASIA



14 APOCALYPTICA

# CONT

## FRONT ROW

- 8 DIVIDE AND DISSOLVE mastermind Takiaya Reed pivots from drone to a BBC symphony.
- 10 From giant rats to Justin Hawkins, AVANTASIA/EDGUY man Tobias Sammet answers your questions.
- 14 Inside APOCALYPTICA cellist Eicca Toppinen's Slaylist.
- 16 Goth king CHRIS MOTIONLESS shares his Life Lessons.
- 20 The story behind the ultimate fist-pumping, PMA PARKWAY DRIVE anthem, *Vice Grip*.
- 24 Get to know CHAT PILE, the noise punks storming the mainstream.

## FEATURES

- 34 Megastar collabs. Stadium support slots. A brand new album. Here's why SPIRITBOX are unstoppable.
- 42 With LIMP BIZKIT's popularity soaring once more, we go inside The Durstnaissance.
- 48 KILLSWITCH ENGAGE frontman Jesse Leach gets The Hammer Interview treatment.
- 54 How rising pop-metallers VUKOVI are driving out their demons.
- 58 Can WARDRUNA's Einar Selvik become the next Bear Grylls?
- 64 Why FIT FOR AN AUTOPSY aren't your average deathcore band.





42 LIMP BIZKIT



58 WARDRUNA

# ENTS

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NOW & SAVE**

Head to p.32  
for details

- 72** Italian goth-metallers LACUNA COIL celebrate three dark decades.  
**78** We revisit GUNS N' ROSES' wild Use Your Illusion tour.

## ALBUMS

- 90** KILLSWITCH ENGAGE take a tour of their divided nation.  
**92** LACUNA COIL bring more heaviness to their hooks.  
**93** DREAM THEATER welcome back the talismanic Mike Portnoy.  
**94** Ukrainian ambassadors JINJER dig deeper into their dark side.  
**95** Germany's groove ruffians MANTAR refocus their assault.

- 96** SAOR wring more folk/black romanticism from the Highlands.  
**97** SICKSENSE attempt to broaden their nu metal base.

## LIVES

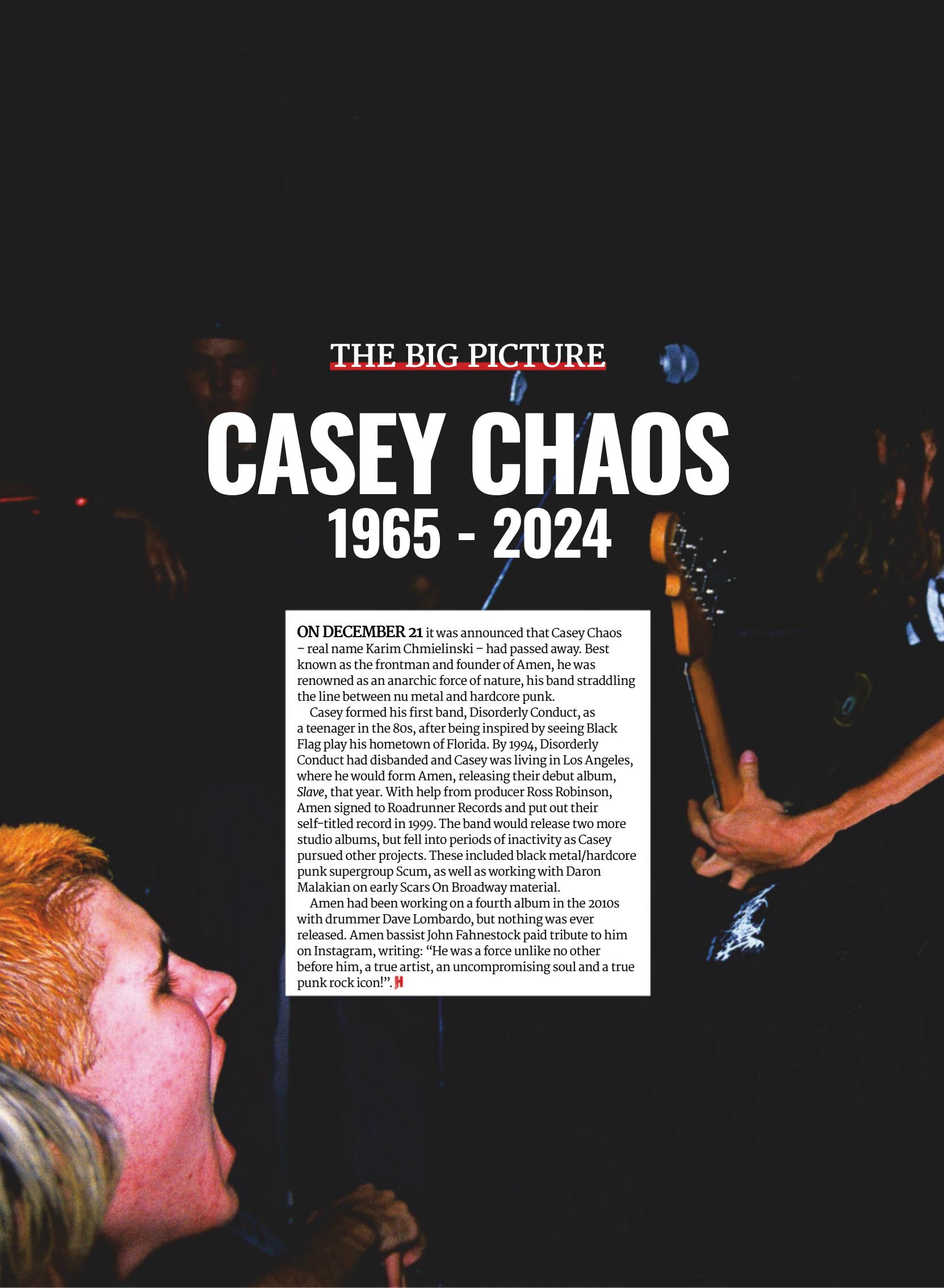
- 98** SLIPKNOT resurrect their debut.  
**100** FUTURE PALACE bring post-hardcore euphoria to Highbury.  
**101** MYLES KENNEDY and DEVIN TOWNSEND join forces.  
**102** OBITUARY swamp the senses.  
**103** WHILE SHE SLEEPS host a hometown celebration.  
**105** THE PRODIGY prove indefatigable in Brixton.



105 THE PRODIGY



72 LACUNA COIL



THE BIG PICTURE

# CASEY CHAOS

## 1965 - 2024

ON DECEMBER 21 it was announced that Casey Chaos – real name Karim Chmielinski – had passed away. Best known as the frontman and founder of Amen, he was renowned as an anarchic force of nature, his band straddling the line between nu metal and hardcore punk.

Casey formed his first band, Disorderly Conduct, as a teenager in the 80s, after being inspired by seeing Black Flag play his hometown of Florida. By 1994, Disorderly Conduct had disbanded and Casey was living in Los Angeles, where he would form Amen, releasing their debut album, *Slave*, that year. With help from producer Ross Robinson, Amen signed to Roadrunner Records and put out their self-titled record in 1999. The band would release two more studio albums, but fell into periods of inactivity as Casey pursued other projects. These included black metal/hardcore punk supergroup Scum, as well as working with Daron Malakian on early Scars On Broadway material.

Amen had been working on a fourth album in the 2010s with drummer Dave Lombardo, but nothing was ever released. Amen bassist John Fahnestock paid tribute to him on Instagram, writing: “He was a force unlike no other before him, a true artist, an uncompromising soul and a true punk rock icon!”. 





## THE HOT TOPIC

# ROLL OVER, BEETHOVEN

Divide And Dissolve's Takiaya Reed has made the leap to composing symphonies – with some help from the BBC

WORDS: ALEX DELLER

IT'S A TYPICAL winter day in London: cold and grey with the damp doing its best to seep into your bones. Nonetheless, Takiaya Reed is beaming.

As the driving force behind anti-colonial doom/drone behemoth Divide And Dissolve, she's been delivering chest-crumpling heaviness and flights of unbridled joy for the best part of a decade. Beyond being a formidable riff-wielder, though, she's also a classically trained saxophonist – one who's currently putting the finishing touches to her first symphony for the BBC Concert Orchestra. "My entire life I have wanted to write a symphony, and now... I have," she smiles.

We catch up while she takes a break from composition, feeling somewhat guilty for breaking her concentration. "It's something I felt called to do," she explains. "I am so excited to do it again – now I just want to write symphony number two, because I'm learning so much and there are things that I would love to do differently next time. I hope there is a next time."

Takiaya is crackling with excitement, and her enthusiasm is absolutely infectious. She was contacted, seemingly out of the blue, to take part

in BBC Radio 3's *Unclassified Live*, an ambitious event that sees three outlier artists commissioned to compose or reinterpret music for performance at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall.

"They're so amenable to helping you achieve what you want to achieve," she says. "They didn't have a choir and I asked for a choir. Because my music is so low and heavy, I asked for a tuba... and I got a tuba."

The headcount tops out at around 60 world-class musicians, what with the orchestra, choir, tuba, conductor and Takiaya herself on soprano sax.

"I've got all of this to work with and it's awesome," she says delightedly. "When I'm composing for Divide And Dissolve I hear all these instruments anyways, I'm just condensing it down for two people. Here, I was given the opportunity to be more expansive."

While many would be daunted by the prospect of a blank sheet of paper and a 60-strong orchestra to wrangle, Takiaya is clearly in her element. To bring her vision to life, she's been working with arranger Fiona Brice (also a solo artist and session musician, who has worked with the likes of Placebo and Beyoncé) to pare back her four-movement composition from its initial, maximalist incarnation to something leaner, where the energy is more powerfully focused. The process has been rapid, with Takiaya spending much of her downtime



Takiaya Reed is a writing machine!

on tour writing and ruminating, gathering her ideas in order to meet the project's stringent deadlines.

"I'm not sure if it's my preference to write under pressure, but everyone involved needs time," she explains. "I write quickly, though, and when you are working with a brilliant arranger like Fiona, the process moves faster than if I was writing all the parts down by myself. And something different would've happened if I'd had a lot of time, so I'm happy that it moved quickly because I needed it to. I had something to get out, and it's there now."

Takiaya isn't exaggerating when she says she writes quickly. As well as penning the symphony for the BBC, she has two new albums in the bag.

"I was staying in Berlin for a couple of months," she says. "I have a friend there who's an incredible musician,

**"MY ENTIRE LIFE I'VE  
WANTED TO WRITE  
A SYMPHONY"**



and she invited me to stay at her studio to write and record. I wrote a brand new Divide And Dissolve album. Then, we got in the studio in January last year and I started writing new music. I just felt compelled to write a brand new album on the spot."

This second album was named *Insatiable*, fittingly enough, and it will be Divide And Dissolve's first release for their new label, Bella Union. Although it was written and recorded months before the symphony was on the table, there are certain threads that connect them.

"I feel like they're indistinguishable in a way," says Takiaya. "There are certain moments from *Insatiable* that are being transposed, or rather, being infused into the symphony. But they're being expressed differently because there are so many voices."

In many ways this duality sums Divide And Dissolve up nicely. The

band effortlessly combine heaviness, beauty, rage and hope in a manner that suits sticky-floored rock clubs full of metalheads in Black Sabbath shirts as well as arts spaces or concert halls.

"I do appreciate that it transcends genre," laughs Takiaya. "I feel like it's something that happens personally, as well. People look at me and they get something that's different to what they expected. And it's represented in the people I'm friends with. I'll have parties at my house, and people are like, 'Takiaya's having a party... we're about to meet people we've never met before!'" H

**YOU CAN HEAR TAKIAYA'S SESSION FOR RADIO 3 UNCLASSIFIED LIVE ON BBC IPLAYER NOW.**  
**DIVIDE AND DISSOLVE'S NEXT ALBUM, *INSATIABLE*, IS DUE APRIL 18 VIA BELLA UNION**

# HAMMER STEREO

What's been blowing our office speakers



## LACUNA COIL

*Sleepless Empire*

"Gorgeous and dark, just like we've come to expect from the Italian veterans"

**ELEANOR GOODMAN**  
EDITOR



## MANTAR

*Post Apocalyptic*

*Depression*

"The true, tetanus-riddled spirit of punk, fired by grooves that could level a city centre"

**JONATHAN SELZER**  
REVIEWS EDITOR



## KILLSWITCH ENGAGE

*This Consequence*

"Man, Jesse Leach is MIFFED! What a stunning album"

**VANESSA THORPE**  
PRODUCTION EDITOR



## KILLSWITCH ENGAGE

*This Consequence*

"Get this in your ears!"

**LOUISE BROCK**  
ART EDITOR



## BLOODYWOOD

*Nu Delhi*

"A much-needed splash of vibrancy to brighten up the end of winter"

**RICH HOBSON**  
STAFF WRITER



## IMPERIAL TRIUMPHANT

*Goldstar*

"Gold masks are so going to be 2025's must-have fashion accessory"

**DAVE EVERLEY**  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR





# WHAT'S YOUR GO-TO KARAOKE SONG?

Avantasia and Edguy frontman Tobias Sammet gets grilled on opera music, dinner parties and massive rats

WORDS: CHRIS CHANTLER • PICTURES: KEVIN NIXON

**REJOICE! THE MAGICAL** German ‘metal opera’ project Avantasia are back with their 10th album, *Here Be Dragons*, an uproarious new video for punchy, three-minute advance cut *Creepshow* (filmed at Allerton Castle in Yorkshire); and a show at London’s prestigious Roundhouse venue.

To celebrate the return of this symphonic supergroup and their rotating stack of megastar guest vocalists, we got hold of Avantasia mastermind, Edguy frontman and all-round lovely chap Tobias Sammet, and asked him your questions about all the important subjects, from Freddie Mercury to giant rats.

#### What's the most metal opera?

Alex Badger, email

“I know of one or two that are called *The Metal Opera*, so based on the name they've got to be the most metal operas! I have no idea, because the funny thing is, although I like the stories, I like the staging, the visual approach, the narrative aspect, and I like the chandeliers, I was never into opera music. I like classical music, but as soon as they start to sing, they sound like sirens – it turns me off!”

**You've had the likes of Floor Jansen and Geoff Tate as guests on Avantasia songs. Who's been your favourite?**

Jade Whitfield, email

“That's a question I cannot answer for political reasons! Everybody fills a special type of song with their own life and soul. It's a massive puzzle, and everybody is important, so I really

couldn't say favourites. That sounds like a cheap excuse, but I'm really happy about everybody!”

#### Who's still on your guest wishlist?

Joel Watkins, Facebook

“I stopped making bucket lists, because if you approach it like that you become one of those ‘all-star’ projects, which I don't think Avantasia is at this point. But I wouldn't mind working with Bruce Dickinson. Just for personal, sentimental reasons, because he's been a huge inspiration for me since I was a kid. I've met him a couple of times, he's a very nice chap, and a great singer who had a great impact on what I'm doing. But I think he's got other things to do! Bruce, if you read this and think that would be a nice thing to do, call me, we can make this work! I'm not that expensive!”

**Creepshow feels like a very Edguy-esque track in a few different ways. Was this intentional, and does the rest of the album have the same feel?**

Lukas Neilson, Facebook

“‘Intentional’ would sound like I sat down with a plan, and most things I do just come the way they come. But I have to say, most of the time in the past, Avantasia was about that misunderstood melancholic kid. I had to get lots of things off my chest. On this album I really enjoyed just writing a party song and letting it take me in its own direction. Our webmaster said the new album reminds him of [Edguy albums] *Hellfire Club* and *Theatre Of Salvation*. I don't think the songs are

similar, but they've got this youthful energy, full of piss and vinegar. Every song makes a strong impact, which I think gives it a certain Edguy feel.”

**Hammer: Was making the *Creepshow* video as much fun as it looks, or are you all just really good actors?**

“It was a lot of fun. I don't like video shoots, because most of the time is spent waiting for your cue, then sitting around for another two hours until you're back on camera, but with this video we had the whole setting and the atmosphere. Everybody knows I love England – I'm like an English kid trapped in the body of an ageing German! The castle was so typically British, in a remote place outside York. I didn't know exactly what to expect, so when I entered that castle and saw all these actors, costumes and masks, the lighting... everything was so magical, almost a setting from an old Hammer Studios film. Sascha [Paeth], our guitarist, told me that evening that it was one of the best experiences he's ever had in his music career. That says something – he's even older than me!”

**What advice would you give to young bands?**

Swetlana Adler, Facebook

“That's difficult, I can't even remember being young at this point! The music business has changed so much. What I can say from my perspective is do what you feel. Most likely you'll fail, but failing at something you love is much better than failing at something someone else told you to do, that you ►

An "English kid trapped in the body of an ageing German"



"BRUCE DICKINSON  
HAS BEEN A HUGE  
INSPIRATION FOR ME"

didn't believe in in the first place. Stick to what you believe in and work hard at it. Do what makes you happy, then if you succeed there's a chance you'll make somebody else happy. Eric Singer [the drummer] of Kiss told me that when you get a chance in life, once you've taken that chance, another door will open up, you'll be given more chances to make it further up from that level, and that is true."

#### **Who would be your dream dinner guest, living or dead?**

Rosie O'Donnell, email

"Of course everybody would say Freddie Mercury, because he was such an interesting character; the way he wrote and performed, the things he'd have to say, his whole life story, and he had a good tongue-in-cheek British sense of humour! So that'd be something."

#### **Do you think Edguy helped the power metal genre survive?**

Briony Marshall, email

"Helped? We made the genre survive! Ha ha ha! We were one of the first bands there when it was getting back on the map, but there were others. Helloween were always there, and Gamma Ray and Stratovarius, then of course there was the third wave like Dragonforce, and it was getting bigger. But when I started playing music, I'd never heard the term 'power metal'. Heavy metal was powerful by nature. I never sat racking my brains about 'Is our record power metal, or hard rock, or hard metal, or Hollywood metal, even?' It's music, and you either like it or not. But if it helps the industry to market your music, let them call it whatever they want!"

#### **When are Edguy coming back?**

Alexandre Jeannin, Facebook

"Good question! I have no idea, really. It's not that I don't care, that's a misconception. The truth is, we got together as 14-year-old kids. Nobody could sing, nobody could play an instrument, nobody could write songs... and we developed, side-by-side, at the same pace. But at a certain point we were going in different directions. Everyone has a different work ethic and a different approach to how things should be done, and people started to argue. After a while, 90% of the energy was going into trying to find compromises, and that's not easy,

## **"EDGUY MADE POWER METAL SURVIVE"**



Tobias Sammet... or is it Justin Hawkins?!

especially if you're the one who does really everything. With Avantasia I can produce an album in two months. With Edguy, in two months we haven't even agreed what key the first song should be in! We still get along, but everybody has found different ways to make their living. The book is not shut yet. God knows what's going to happen or when, but it won't be soon. I wouldn't mind singing those songs onstage again, but right now I don't miss it enough to bear the stomach ache I had going to the rehearsal room every day."

#### **Who would play you in a movie of your life?**

Andi Price, email

"I haven't been approached that often, but how about Justin Hawkins? Or, more likely, I'd play him in a movie about The Darkness!"

#### **Would you rather fight a horse-sized rat, or 100 rat-sized horses?**

Joe Cartwright, email

"Just to see the horse-sized rat, I'd go with that one! I wouldn't fight little baby horses. I want to fight a mean, giant rat. Rats can destroy anything, but tiny horses, they'd be more like guinea pigs, I wouldn't fight those!"

#### **Would Avantasia ever consider making a tie-in novel/comic/movie?**

Ellie Windmill, email

"No, but oftentimes when I started a story for a new album, I'd approach it like a novel. But there was a point when I realised, novels and metal opera concept albums are very different artforms. I don't believe they are as connected as some people think. When you write a novel, you have to mind rules that are completely different from what you do in an album format. But this is the 10th Avantasia album, and it's the first one where I didn't put the storyline first. There's a common thread, a feeling and a basic world lying underneath, but I wanted to write individual songs and short stories. And it was such a relief, it was so liberating."

#### **What's your go-to karaoke song?**

Chris Loynes, email

"I don't have a karaoke song, but today in the shower I have been singing that 80s pop song *Your Love* by The Outfield, and I love to sing *Jessie's Girl* by Rick Springfield. He was a two-hit wonder. [Actually, Rick had five US Top 10 singles! – 80s Rock Ed.] But who am I to talk? I'm a no-hit wonder!" 

**HERE BE DRAGONS IS OUT FEBRUARY 28 VIA NAPALM. AVANTASIA PLAY LONDON'S ROUNDHOUSE ON MARCH 24**

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## THE SLAYLIST

# EICCA TOPPINEN

Metallica songs alongside symphonies? It could only be the playlist of Apocalyptica and Bright & Black's shredding cellist

WORDS: PERRAN HELYES • PICTURES: DEREK BREMNER

“**THE REFLEX** BY DURAN DURAN was the first thing that I was a huge fan of. My dad had a massive classical collection, and my older sister had Michael Jackson and Wham!, but Duran Duran were the first band that I found. I had all the posters, and my schoolmates were all into Twisted Sister and W.A.S.P., which I liked too, but I was the only one who liked Duran Duran. They had great songs and the sound was interesting, but it still had some edge in the guitar playing.

“I didn’t have money to buy albums, so I would go to the local library and borrow from there. From **THE JIMI HENDRIX EXPERIENCE** I had this live album, *Winterland*, and I would pick *Foxy Lady* from there. The riff was so grinding and I was fascinated by his guitar playing. There was something so musical in that that really captivated me.

“*Orion* by **METALLICA** was one of the most important moments in my musical path. I was around 13 years old, and was in the music school orchestra summer camp, and some guys there had *Master Of Puppets*. I wasn’t that familiar with heavy metal vocals, so the instrumental hit me first, and it was more like an extension of the classical music I knew without any vocals. That was my gateway into Metallica’s sound, and I was totally mesmerised by that song. Then, of course, I started listening to the whole album and there was no return!

“I’d played cello for years by that point, but it was mainly baroque stuff I didn’t really like that much. Then I heard **DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH**’s *Symphony No. 7*. Like *Orion* was for metal, this was classical that just blew my mind and was the coolest shit I had ever heard. It’s a massive symphony over an hour long, but it has this same core feeling of things grinding deep within you. There are parts in there that are so meta! That’s dope shit, and Shostakovich became then – and still is – my favourite composer.

“Another classical piece I loved was from the Finnish composer **JEAN SIBELIUS** – his *Karelia Suite*. Sometimes I experienced [emotional] things as a teenager playing in a symphony orchestra, and then one [composition] would come along that would make me dig deeper. I can warmly recommend those pieces to all metal fans, because they are beautiful but not overly sweet. Instead, they are painfully beautiful and that is what really speaks to us in a healing way.

**“METAL IS AN ATTITUDE”**

“The title track of *Sehnsucht* from **RAMMSTEIN** summarises very well what Rammstein were originally, before they evolved to appeal to a wider spectrum. Everybody is always talking about how great their show is, and it is one of a kind, but I would always rather talk about the music, because people ignore it sometimes. People ask if I like Rammstein because of the show, and I have to say, ‘No, I love the music!’ The sound they introduced is so brutal and that beat that they use is so stable, like electronic music.

“I heard *Oroborus* from **GOJIRA** at a time when I had started to lose excitement for metal music. It was going towards too much safety and copying these rules of what was and wasn’t metal. For me, metal is an attitude. I was struggling to find anything that was new and fresh, and then I heard *Oroborus*, and that was something that was very different. I feel so much joy seeing such an extreme band being as successful and headlining festivals now; they have this emotional colour to their music.

“**SLAYER**’s *Disciple* is, for me, the most powerful metal song. It’s perfection. I wasn’t even a big Slayer fan when I was younger; maybe the aesthetics were too much for a sensitive kid, or the guitar solos were too freaky. But when *Disciple* came out, there hadn’t really been such great records for a while, and there is not a single thing I would change in that song. There is nothing more convincing than when Tom Araya is spitting out, ‘I hate everyone equally!’ When I’d had an argument or something was going wrong, I’d start my old Volvo 240 and put that song on. By the time it was over, I’d be happy.

“**SYSTEM OF A DOWN** are just an energy and a madness. **B.Y.O.B.** got me, because I was a late bloomer with System Of A Down. They became my most-listened-to band for a long time, and that was something else that was just so fresh.

“In the last year I’ve been very much into the Norwegian electronic duo **RÖYKSOPP**, and their track *Alpha Male*. Often if I have music on in the background, I like have to something not similar to what I work on, where I’m not analysing how it’s done. I just get to enjoy it, and this has this wonderful melancholic Nordic vibe.” **H**

**APOCALYPTICA WILL PLAY EUROPEAN FESTIVALS THIS SUMMER INCLUDING DOWNLOAD, HELLFEST AND WACKEN. BRIGHT & BLACK WILL PLAY LONDON’S SHEPHERD’S BUSH EMPIRE ON MAY 8**

A photograph of a man with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a dark t-shirt and jeans with a studded belt. He has a shocked or intense expression, with his mouth wide open and teeth showing. He is pointing his right index finger directly at the viewer. A thin chain necklace with a small pendant hangs around his neck. The background is a dark, textured wall.

Eicca looks like he needs a few minutes  
in his Volvo listening to Disciple...

**TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO**, the ordinary Chris Cerulli was laid to rest. In his stead, Chris Motionless arose, cracking open his coffin and clawing up through six feet of dirt and worms to front metalcore-via-goth stars Motionless In White. With their love of theatrical horror, the band embraced metal's passion for the macabre. But it's not all bats and belfries; with industrial grit and gothic gloom, Chris's aching introspection has seared its way into the hearts and minds of Creatures the world over.

With a new Motionless record in the works, *Hammer* sat down with the frontman to reflect on the taxing graveyard shift he's been working for more than two decades, and learn how he's trying to start focusing on himself.

#### SUCCESS DOESN'T ALWAYS EQUAL HAPPINESS

"Focusing on my career has had a huge impact on my personal life. I gravitated towards a one-sided work life for so long; I got lost in how fast all of it moves, the touring, the record cycles... I've learned that you've got to find ways to exist outside of your career. I don't want to be left with absolutely nothing once this is all over, y'know? I used to neglect relationships and friendships, but focusing on those people that will stick around after the music stops has been instrumental in feeling fulfilled and happy. It requires time and effort, and I'm still trying to get the balance right, but I'm trying to live a complete life."

#### THERAPY IS FOR EVERYONE

"Above everything, make sure you are happy. If you're not, everything else is going to suffer and crumble down. You'll just be left with a shell of what you thought your life would be. I'm a very vocal advocate for therapy. It can feel daunting, but it's vital. For me, therapy feels like opening a door into a dark room – you're lost and confused, but you have to feel around and find out how to light a fire in there. It's scary, but it makes me want to open the next door. I want to keep exploring what's going on in there and find happiness. I've made good progress, but there's a long way to go."

#### ENJOY WHATEVER THE HELL YOU WANT TO

"People are baffled if I say I love Taylor Swift, and it's such a closed-minded way of seeing the world. I guess people see what I look like and just take that at face value. I enjoy lots of things outside of the 'spooky dark' realm.

Like, do people not realise that most of their favourite metal artists also enjoy pop music?"

#### YOU CAN HAVE MANY INTERESTS

"I've also been vocal about loving ice hockey, and people just couldn't grasp that idea. It's odd that people decide what interests an artist is allowed to have – and even weirder when those people also limit their own tastes. You don't want to drown in the quicksand and live in a dull, sterilised environment of interests. You can exist on an incredibly wide spectrum!"

There's been countless times where I've thought, 'I wish I just did this myself.' I started to do that around 2012 – I just got so fed up with being taken advantage of or relying on other people. It stings way less to know that if something's fucked, at least it's your fault."

#### IF IN DOUBT, TAKE A STEP BACK

"The record that we're working on now is taking longer than any other record we've made, and it's partially because, in the past, we went straight from one album cycle directly onto the next. We were machines. But we had a break in the pandemic, and it made me realise how important it is to step away. You need time to process feelings, hang with your friends. It's easy to get tunnel vision when you're a perfectionist, but every time I've stepped away from the album, I come back and I see the bigger picture."

#### TREAT YOURSELF

"Every month, I'll walk away for a week, two weeks, and do something for myself. It might be going to concerts or catching up on movies... Anything to shift the mental focus somewhere else. If you're ever feeling creatively fatigued, just leave it for a moment. Come back to it later."

#### TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY

"In the past, I've been so unhealthy while on tour. Unfortunately, it affects absolutely everything – your body is affected, but there's also an impact mentally when you're fighting through sickness all the time. It's easy to get

so invested in a project that you forget to focus on yourself. Everyone should try to be aware of their physical and mental health. It's crucial. Personally, I've been learning how to cook better meals and going to the gym more."

#### BE AUTHENTIC

"I've never worried about being myself. As a kid, I remember being at the mall and my dad pointing out the punk kids, and I didn't fully understand why – to me, they just looked a bit different. When you have a polarising look, people are more likely to stop and acknowledge you, maybe criticise you or make fun of you. But that's never stopped me. If anything, for a long time, that was a fun thing. I think all of us can relate to a period of our lives where it was fun to piss people off! Everyone deserves that period of discovery – it's good to take things to the extreme, and then dial it back and find where you're most comfortable." ▶



## LIFE LESSONS

# CHRIS MOTIONLESS

Motionless In White's goth king on ice hockey, mall punks... and being a Swiftie?

WORDS: EMILY SWINGLE

You can find something you like in almost anything. There's no limit to what you can enjoy – and I think being open to new things can help you live a fuller life."

#### TAKE THE REINS

"My life mantra is 'If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.' Motionless turned 20 years old last year. Over that time, I've been burned by so many people I thought we could rely on – some of whom were paid and appointed to help us on labels or whatever.

**"PEOPLE ARE BAFFLED IF I SAY I LOVE TAYLOR SWIFT"**

MOTIONLESS IN WHITE



Chris says therapy feels like  
"opening a door into a dark room"  
and figuring out how to light a fire



## “I’VE NEVER WORRIED ABOUT BEING MYSELF”

### WORK HARD – YOU’LL THANK YOURSELF LATER

“Don’t expect that things are just going to be good right away. With everything, you have to be willing to put the time in. We really grinded to get where we are now. We kind of starved for a bit, and that hunger rumbled and propelled us into the success that we craved. Because of the internet, some artists nowadays can bypass that grind and that’s great, but I think the grind made us appreciate things a lot more. When you know how hard you’ve worked, you find a sense of accomplishment that’s unlike anything else. It just furthers your passion and motivation, knowing where you came from and how much further you want to go.”

### KNOW YOUR WORTH

“Every band out there needs to realise: you’re in charge. Sometimes, when you’re younger or just starting out, you feel like you have to go along with things. With Motionless, we were so excited and grateful for the opportunities, that we kind of forgot that the label and all those people back then were working for us. Obviously you can’t kick the door down and tell them how to run things, but, to a degree, you do have the power to speak up for yourselves. You can assert what you want for your band. If you don’t, you may end up at a point where you have a lot of regrets for not speaking up. Recognise that it’s your band. That goes for everything in life – sometimes only you know what will serve you best.”

### THE INTERNET HAS RUINED WELLNESS

“The self-care movement has radicalised a lot of people to use it disingenuously. It’s why it can feel cringe. There are people who speak about self-care and self-help as if it’s this weird joke, and there are also people who talk about it without realising the weight of what self-help really has the potential to be. But that’s the fucking internet for you.”

### LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES

“It can be really hard to move on from the past and things that you can’t change. I’ve spent every single record writing about how you can’t change the past. While that hurts and stings and plagues me every day, I have come around to the idea that the best way to change the past is to live a better future. You need to focus on not repeating mistakes, implement the lessons learned from your past. I’m trying not to get too poetic here or spit out ‘wisdom quotes’ – but I’m about to say something that sounds corny. Really let those past feelings in – let them fucking burn you, and the better you’ll be when you come out of the ashes.” **H**

**MOTIONLESS IN WHITE’S UK TOUR STARTS FEBRUARY 18 IN BIRMINGHAM**



# FESTIVAL MYSTIC

ANTYRADIO

WEDNESDAY 4 JUNE

## WARM UP DAY

THURSDAY 5 JUNE

## IN FLAMES

SUICIDAL TENDENCIES

EAGLES OF DEATH METAL  
IMMINENCE

FRIDAY 6 JUNE

## King Diamond

Opeth

JINJER  
GREEN LUNG

SATURDAY 7 JUNE

## SEPULTURA

DARK TRANQUILLITY  
LANDMVRKS

## EXODUS

JERRY CANTRELL

WHITECHAPEL  
ALCEST  
TBA

## BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE

"THE POISON" 20TH ANNIVERSARY

PERTURBATOR

TURBONEGRO  
POLARIS  
DEFECTS

## W.A.S.P.

TABLE OF FLESH

HEALTH  
TBA  
HATEBREED

## BATHORY

VADER "LITANY" SET

TIAMAT  
PALEFACE SWISS  
TBA

MAIN STAGE

PARK STAGE

THE SHRINE STAGE

DESERT STAGE

SABBATH STAGE

## TOLKA

"NEXIIS POLARIS" SET

MIDNIGHT  
COMBICHRIST  
HIDEOUS DIVINITY  
MARTWA AURA

## Behemoth

NILE  
ORANSSI PAZUZU  
ABSU  
TOTENMESSE

## DEICIDE

ARTHUR BROWN  
SIGNS OF THE SWARM  
CELESTIAL SANCTUARY  
NECROT

## MUNICIPAL WASTE

I AM MORBID  
DEATH ANGEL  
SKELETAL REMAINS  
GROVE STREET

POWERED BY ATONAL AGENCY

## HALOCENE

UNPROCESSED  
CASTLE RAT  
PORT NOIR  
INHUMAN NATURE

## ELDER

TBA  
SUN DONT SHINE  
DOPETHRONE  
RICKSHAW BILLIE'S BURGER PATROL

## EYEHATEGOD

BLINDEAD23  
COBRA THE IMPALER  
FAETOTH  
HEAVE BLOOD & DIE

## PENTAGRAM

SLOMOSA  
JOHN CXNNOR  
BOKASSA  
BAD TOUCHBEWITCHER  
WITCH CLUB SATAN  
SOULBURN

## SUM

SPLIT CHAIN  
LUNA KILLS • THAW  
LAST PENANCE

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## THE STORY BEHIND

# VICE GRIP PARKWAY DRIVE

The song that turned the Aussies from an everyday metalcore band into skydiving, arena-baiting heroes

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS

**TEN THOUSAND FEET** in the air, hanging off the side of a plane over Lake Elsinore, California, it hit Parkway Drive vocalist Winston McCall that he'd probably made a terrible mistake. When the Australian metalcore band had pitched the idea of skydiving for the music video for *Vice Grip*, the first single from their fifth record, *Ire*, they hadn't actually expected director Frankie Nasso to take it seriously. None of them had ever done a skydive in their lives, they only had a week and a half before they were due to be in Canada to record the rest of the album and, to top it off, Winston was deathly terrified of heights. Why hadn't they just gone to a deserted warehouse like every other metalcore band on the planet?

Thank God they didn't. Winston might have spent the entire shoot paralysed by fear, but he acknowledges it was worth the pain. *Vice Grip* is easily Parkway's most memorable, badass video. Featuring the band freefalling through the air before coming together in a sunset-lit formation, it's a bat-shit crazy, hair-raising visual statement. At one point, Winston screams the song's rallying cry: "One life, one shot... GIVE IT ALL YOU'VE GOT!" before he and his bandmates throw themselves out of the plane into thin air.

"It was the most rushed, psychotic lead-up to actually recording an album that you can get," remembers Winston.

In the run-up to the shoot, the band undertook a five-day crash course that enabled them to perform the jumps

without an instructor. The aerial shots were filmed by Joe Jennings, the skydiving cinematographer who choreographed stunts for films such as *Point Break* and *XXX*.

"We weren't actually supposed to be doing any of that stuff on the certification that we had," Winston recalls. "We just had some really good people on the crew that were like, 'No, fuck it, just go for it.' You're not supposed to be getting that close to each other. You're definitely not supposed to be in formation."

A do-or-die metal anthem about overcoming your fears, *Vice Grip* represented Parkway Drive jumping headfirst into a new future. Not only was the track a volte-face from their anthemic but serrated metalcore, it would set them on the path to becoming one of modern metal's heavyweight bands.

"*Vice Grip* was literally the biggest turning point in the band's existence," Winston says. "It defined the next era of Parkway, it was the starting block for everything that's come after it."

With their first four albums, Parkway Drive had risen through the ranks of metalcore, with a lean, gleaming sound that was instantly recognisable. But when they started writing the material that would eventually become *Ire*, they found themselves at a crossroads. The sound that had made them one of the scene's most beloved bands had started to feel claustrophobic.

"*Vice Grip* was the first thing we started writing after we finished [2012's]

### THE FACTS

RELEASED  
2015

ALBUM  
*Ire*

PERSONNEL  
Winston McCall (vocals),  
Jeff Ling (guitar),  
Luke Kilpatrick (guitar),  
Jia O'Connor (bass),  
Ben Gordon (drums)

**IRE**  
Metal Hammer



Parkway Drive (left to right):  
Jeff Ling, Luke Kilpatrick, Winston  
McCall, Jia O'Connor, Ben Gordon

*Atlas*," Winston recalls. "It sounded like old Parkway; that middle breakdown that you hear [in the finished version] was actually the main riff for the entire song. It was just this beatdown-heavy song, and we were like, 'OK, this is sweet, but it's basically just another step down the same path.' It was the feeling of looking and going, 'I swear I've been here before.'"

The band had started making gentle tweaks to their sound on *Atlas*, but had stopped short of anything that would truly alter it.

"We wanted to push further in a different direction," Winston admits. "But people kept telling us, 'Don't fucking do it. They'll crucify you.' At the same time, I watched a lot of bands that didn't take risks stay in the same place. We were going off gut and heart."

Lead guitarist Jeff Ling took the plunge first, playing around with ideas that would change up their formula.

"He sent Ben [Gordon, drums] and I a message saying, 'Don't freak out, but I've done work on that song, and it's unlike anything you've ever heard from us,'" remembers Winston.



Bringing the lead guitar unashamedly to the forefront, spiky metalcore had been replaced by straight-up arena rock, with massive riffs and trench-like grooves. It was a song that demanded to be played in huge venues.

"I remember sending a message to Ben after, saying: 'Dude, I can't get that riff out of my brain,'" says Winston.

Before long, the band had added a huge gang chant chorus, a monstrous breakdown, and verses that saw Winston almost rapping his delivery. That anything-goes attitude and energy set the tone for the rest of the album. From the slow, menacing stomp of *Crushed*, to the clean melodies of *A Deathless Song* and gorgeous strings on *Writings On The Wall*, *Ire* was full of surprising turns, in a committed revamp of the signature band's sound.

"There was a lot of 90s in there," Winston muses, explaining how the diverse influences that fed the album were reflective of the band's personal tastes. "You can hear everything from Metallica to Rage Against the Machine,

to Nick Cave, Tom Waits and Red Hot Chili Peppers. We tried to steer clear of anything super-contemporary at that point in time, because we wanted to make something that was not of the time."

When the music video for *Vice Grip* premiered on June 8, 2015, to say some fans were upset would be a bit of an understatement. Sure, there were those who bonded with the song's audacious swagger from the off, but plenty howled their displeasure into the void, dismissing the track as "generic" and "mainstream". The band, who were doing the European

## **"VICE GRIP WAS THE BIGGEST TURNING POINT IN THE BAND'S EXISTENCE"**

WINSTON McCALL

festival circuit, watched as their YouTube feed turned into a binfire of negative comments.

"It looked like Armageddon," Winston hoots, recalling the 'RIP Parkway' comments. "This band are dead, no one wants them anymore."

"But here's the thing," he adds with a grin. "We knew that song was going to fucking crush."

The next day, when they played it live for the first time in Lille, France, the singer noticed a few fans singing along, a number that would increase the following night. By the time the band reached Greenfield Festival in Interlaken, Switzerland, on June 11, *Vice Grip* had become the biggest moment of the set.

"We've never had a song explode like that one did," Winston says. "For all of the controversy, fucking hell, that thing just laid waste to that festival season for us. I was still watching the firestorm go on in the comments, like, 'No, sorry, don't believe everything on the internet.'"

The impact *Ire* had on Parkway Drive's trajectory was substantial and immediate. Released on September 25, 2015, it was the band's most successful record to date, hitting No.1 in the ARIA chart in Australia, No.23 in the UK ►

Parkway Drive: back on land after their skydiving debut

# “I WATCHED BANDS THAT DIDN’T TAKE RISKS STAY IN THE SAME PLACE”

WINSTON McCALL



album chart and No.29 in the US Billboard 200. At the same time, the band's live shows were bumped up into bigger venues. That cycle, they played London's Brixton Academy twice and packed it to the gills both times. Their broader sound demanded production to match: on the *Ire* 2016 tour, the band's live shows became beefed-up, fire-bombing extravaganzas that featured a spinning drumkit. Parkway the potential festival headliners had arrived.

“*Ire* was the first time that we had exponential growth of that size,” Winston says. “By the end of the run, we'd added a spinning drumkit. Word got out: ‘Parkway are doing some wild shit now.’”

Since then, the band have continued to expand their horizons. In 2018, they followed up *Ire* with the bombastic *Reverence*, which saw them introduce gothic synths on slow-burner *Cemetery Bloom*, with Winston performing album closer *The Colour Of Leaving* acoustically backed by violins. In 2022, they released possibly their most divisive statement yet with the dramatic, intricate and less immediate *Darker Still*.

“[After *Ire*] I don't think there's anything actually holding us back anymore,” Winston acknowledges. “I think we really have pushed so far that we have the truest understanding of our identity possible.”

One thing is for certain: every flame, spark and glitter cannon Parkway Drive have ever set off can be traced back to *Vice Grip* – the biggest risk the band have ever taken, and the one that's paid off the most.

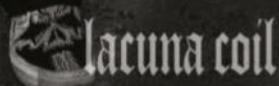
“It's strange to think that at some point in time people didn't associate it with the band, because I think it's probably the number one thing you do associate with us now,” Winston smiles. “It's a genuine anthem, and everyone looks forward to it [when we play it live]. It was the start of everything, and I can pinpoint it all back to rewriting a song into something that felt so new. That was the moment where genuine ambition had the courage to take the steering wheel.” 

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**PARKWAY DRIVE'S UK ARENA TOUR STARTS AT WEMBLEY ARENA ON OCTOBER 4**

# Lacuna Coil

GOTH METAL LEGENDS LACUNA COIL RETURN WITH STUDIO ALBUM NO. 10  
“SLEEPLESS EMPIRE”



SLEEPLESS EMPIRE

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INSTORE AND ONLINE FROM VALENTINES DAY

# CHAT PILE

The US metallic noise punks storming the mainstream

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • MATTHEW ZAGORSKI

**"IT SEEMS LIKE** the metal purists are a little... shy about claiming us," Chat Pile guitarist Luther Manhole admits.

He's not wrong. Despite having a sound that crosses over into a variety of scenes – from hardcore to noise rock, alt metal and beyond – and releasing critically acclaimed albums in 2022's *God's Country* and 2024's *Cool World*, the Oklahoma City quartet seem to do a pretty good job of pissing people off. Not least because they're using the iconography of extreme metal.

"Spiritually, our music is as dark as any black metal music or whatever," snorts bassist Stin. "Maybe the actual delivery system is a little different, but the message and the emotional qualities we're trying to portray are there. But the elitists don't like that we have a scratchy twig-looking metal logo. I don't think it's stolen valour to have a metal logo, but it pisses off these purists, who think that we're just hipsters appropriating metal culture or whatever. Get bent – I don't care!"

In their own words, Chat Pile are just "trying to capture the anxiety and fear of seeing the world fall apart". But they also have a laissez-faire attitude to sticking to conventions, preferring to have fun. When asked about the future of the band, Stin tells us they intend to get more and more experimental, before sarcastically adding, "If it keeps working for us, great! If not, we'll be on the [funk-rock also-rans] 311 cruise doing *God's Country* in full in 15 years!"

The band's ability to laugh at themselves and the scene around them was brilliantly evident last year, in the aftermath of Deicide frontman Glen Benton's infamous tirade against modern metal bands being a "bunch of wannabe Weezer-looking dudes". It hilariously prompted Chat Pile to post a picture of themselves all over social media, mocked up as the front cover of Weezer's classic *Blue Album*.

"I really do get a kick out of pissing off the real purists," grins Stin, before cackling. "Glen Benton's such a Facebook grandpa!"

"It's such high school lunchroom table bullshit to me," adds Luther. "All these people who think that there should be these 'rules' when it comes to the type of music you make, what's allowed and what's not allowed. It's an ancient, outdated mode of thought."

Chat Pile's live shows continue the theme; a mix of utterly crushing, corrosive noise and between-song banter from frontman Raygun Busch about lost 80s movies, such as Michael Keaton's 1989 comedy *The Dream Team*. Spouted while

wearing nothing but a pair of Y-fronts.

You don't get that at a Cult Of Luna show.

"There's so many people confused or even let down because we weren't these 'dark sex poet leather guys' or whatever," Stin says. "We were just ourselves. But it was

shocking to people that we didn't have this stupid macabre persona. To me, it makes what we're doing all the more real, because we're not presenting to anybody this sort of imagined, idealised version of our message."

They may enjoy stirring the pot online and onstage, but Chat Pile are no comedy band, creating a brilliantly harsh and scabrous amalgam of noise rock and groove metal riffs. Their style is inspired by the myriad genres and artists they enjoy, whether from the

metal sphere or not. They're also uninterested in scoring cool points by only namechecking underground artists.

"I listened to *Children Of God* by Swans yesterday," Stin tells us. "I was like, 'You know, there's riffs you'd hear later in Korn in this shit!' Even emotionally, they share the similar territory. The difference is that you can be all high and mighty and pretentious about liking Swans, but people treat it like you'd have to be a moron to like Korn. I just don't agree with that type of thinking."

## IN SHORT

### SOUNDS LIKE:

Discordant noise punk with downtuned metal riffs and grooves, plus actual hooks

### FOR FANS OF:

Big Black, Melvins, Butthole Surfers

### LISTEN TO:

Funny Man

The result of this attitude and particular set of influences is Chat Pile's latest album, *Cool World*. Compared to *God's Country*, it's more succinct, catchier and immediate without ever sacrificing the manic intensity of their previous work. Songs such as the pummelling *Funny Man*, the stalking *Masc* or the brooding, grinding weight of *Camcorder* feel like a version of *Around The Fur*-era Deftones fronted by Henry Rollins and produced by Steve Albini. Chat Pile have found a way to have their noise rock cake and still eat big, punk-metal bangers.

"We wanted every song to have some memorable... something, you know?" Luther says. "Otherwise, why is it on there?"

"Nirvana are a big reference point in all this too," adds

Stin. "Because that's how I got into music, so it's in my DNA. I can't really escape it even if I wanted to."

It's interesting to hear him mention Nirvana, a noisy underground punk band that became the biggest thing in music. Because, although you can tell that it is absolutely not by design, Chat Pile are starting to cross over. Mainstream outlets such as Pitchfork, The Needle Drop and *The Guardian* certainly think so, calling them one of the most exciting bands in current heavy music.

"We're surprised that anybody knows who we are," laughs Stin. "We started this band to play local shows to our friends. We never thought it would break past the small Oklahoma City scene. So now, to get reviews in Pitchfork or end up on these 'best albums of the year' lists, it's beyond the scope of anything that would have been conceivable to us five years ago. I never saw it coming!"

**COOL WORLD IS OUT NOW VIA THE FLENSER. CHAT PILE PLAY ROADBURN FESTIVAL IN APRIL AND TOUR THE UK FROM APRIL 20**

Chat Pile: pissing off  
purists since 2019



# DANEFAE

The prog metallers proving there's more to Denmark than Vikings and mermaids

WORDS: BRIAN ABERBACK • PICTURE: LUCAS ILLANEZ

**DANEFAE FORMED IN** 2019 at the Det Jyske Musikkonservatorium, a Danish music conservatory. But unlike their peers, who were inclined towards jazz and pop, they united over a love for prog metal and experimental sounds, drawing on the likes of Haken, Dream Theater and Tool. Vocalist Anne Olesen's Kate Bush/Björk/sylph-like voice perfectly underpins the band's blend of pastoral and ominous guitarwork, ethereal melody and disconcerting piano to create a dynamic, unsettling atmosphere.

"I played a lot of classical piano as a kid," Anne says. "It's a way to keep my origin."

Danefae's 2022 debut album, *Tro*, blended folkish elements with prog

to create compositions that were gorgeous and immersive, if only metal-adjacent at times. Their second album, *Trøst* (Danish for 'comfort'), delves into prog metal in haunting, distinctly Scandinavian fashion.

"We composed a lot of the songs in a summer house deep in the woods in Jutland listening to Opeth's *Blackwater Park*," explains guitarist Anders Mogensen. "That very dark, Nordic vibe resonated."

Although the band can speak English, they sing in Danish, Anne joking that early attempts at writing in English were "so bad I've been forbidden!" That doesn't stop their music being devastating at times. *Trøst* centrepiece *P.S. Far er død* – translated as 'P.S. Dad

## IN SHORT

### SOUNDS LIKE:

An otherworldly, prog-metal planet with ominous sonic vibrations

### FOR FANS OF:

Opeth,  
Haken,  
Myrkur

### LISTEN TO:

*P.S. Far er død*

is dead' – is a vivid, 12-minute journey through grief, written about the passing of Anne's grandfather.

*'Men ingen krop kan vare evigt ved / Tynde arme slipper over tid,'* she sings. Translated into English, that's 'But no body can last forever / Thin arms let go over time.'

"The more ill you get and the less you eat, the weaker you get," Anne recalls sadly. "The thin arms gave me a very bleak feeling."

"The music gets sonically heavy, but also it's meant to convey heavy feelings," Anders says. "It really perpetuates that terrible feeling of not knowing your place in the world." **H**

**TRØST IS OUT ON JANUARY 31**



Cantervice: music  
for our times

NEW NOISE



# CANTERVICE

Concept-driven metalcore from the land of the free

WORDS: ALI SHUTLER • PICTURES: ROBERT MATLOCK

**PART NU METAL** fantasy, part steely eyed social commentary, *Zero Hour* is a warning, according to Cantervice's Robert Matlock. The debut album from the Dallas, Texas band takes inspiration from dystopian cinema like *Blade Runner*, cutting it with the industrial might of Rammstein and the raw emotion of Linkin Park, all to explore a concept where the media is used to spread hate, divide and control. Sound familiar?

It's a reflection of the world around us, but the project's been a long time coming. Robert first began toying with the idea of Cantervice in 2015, after stints in local metalcore bands.

It's only when he met a producer who understood his vision (Evan McKeever) that things began falling into place. The creeping, menacing *The Machine* was released in 2022, with the crunching *Void* following shortly afterwards.

"I didn't think any of this stuff would actually resonate, it was just an outlet for how frustrated I was feeling," Robert admits.

But both tracks racked up hundreds of thousands of streams, and Robert knew he had to finish the story with an album. The end result is a modern twist on oos aggression, with moments of serenity, hope and beauty designed to offer a light in the dark.

## IN SHORT SOUNDS LIKE:

Dystopian cinema  
raging against  
the machine

**FOR FANS OF:**  
Bring Me The  
Horizon,  
Linkin Park,  
Spiritbox

**LISTEN TO:**  
*The Masquerade*

"With everything going on in the world right now, I wanted to put out some positivity," he says.

*Zero Hour*'s sci-fi story is grounded in humanity, and there's already talk of a second album that'll delve deeper into the personal cost of dystopian living.

"It's nostalgic, because of who we're inspired by, but people are turning to aggressive music and really starting to resonate with the themes we're talking about," says Robert of their success.

"It's all about making a difference. We want to weaponise curiosity."

**ZERO HOUR IS OUT NOW  
VIA FIXT**

# PALEFACE SWISS

The Zurich crew dubbed the “deathcore Slipknot”

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS

**PALEFACE SWISS HAD** one hell of a 2024. The band, who formed in Zurich, Switzerland in 2017, had already built a loyal following with two EPs (2018's *Chapter 1: From The Gallows* and 2019's *Chapter 2: Witch King*) and two albums (2020's *Chapter 3: The Last Selection* and 2022's *Fear & Dagger*), but things kicked off dramatically last year. Not only did they earn a rep for almost comically heavy breakdowns, but their chaotic, corrosive blend of deathcore, hardcore, nu metal and thrash, with maniacal vocals from Marc ‘Zelli’ Zellweger, won them comparisons to early Slipknot.

“It’s a huge honour, honestly,” says Marc. “We don’t want to copycat everything they’re doing, but if 30–

## IN SHORT

### SOUNDS LIKE:

The off-the-rails energy of vintage Slipknot with a modern twist

### FOR FANS OF:

Slipknot,  
Throwin,  
Malevolence

### LISTEN TO:

Hatred

40-year-old people are saying, ‘When I was young, the fucking Slipknot self-titled came out and now I feel the same [listening to Paleface Swiss] as I did back then, that’s unbelievable.’

The band only started playing gigs in 2022, but are already known for their out-of-control performances. Since they announced their UK tour for February/March, all of the venues have been upgraded due to demand, and it’s not hard to see why. Just check out a video of them orchestrating an obscene wall of death at last year’s Resurrection Festival, or whipping up crowds at Sick New World in Las Vegas. On their US headlining tour last year, there was no support band, just an extreme wrestling match... with Marc as referee.

“They slammed each other through the table, and I took away the shirt from the referee and pinned them down,” he says with glee. “The crowd went nuts.”

2025 is already shaping up to be another big one. The band just released their killer third album, *Cursed*, and will play the main stage at Bloodstock this summer.

“Every show is about pushing to the limit, as if it’s a workout,” says Marc. “I think the people can feel that.” **H**

**CURSED IS OUT NOW VIA BLOOD BLAST. PALEFACE SWISS’S UK TOUR STARTS IN BIRMINGHAM ON FEBRUARY 25 AND THEY PLAY BLOODSTOCK IN AUGUST**

The “deathcore Slipknot” are coming for you



Vower: British talent building a buzz



# VOWER

**From the ashes of three beloved UK cult bands rises a fiery new phoenix**

WORDS: MATT MILLS • PICTURES: SILV JAVIL

**VOWER'S MUSIC CAN'T** be pigeonholed. The British five-piece – whose members formerly played in beloved cult bands Toska, Black Peaks and Palm Reader – write anthemic metal songs with an intellectual twist. Their choruses are moreish and their breakdowns beefy, yet they're framed by intricate riffing and off-kilter drums.

"The phrase that we chucked around at the start was 'big riffs, large hooks,'" laughs guitarist Rabea Massaad. "But also, I really, personally love pushing the boat out with instrumentation and arrangement."

Vower started in 2021. Shortly after his prog trio Toska split, Rabea began jamming with drummer Liam Kearley, whose own band Black Peaks had just called it quits too. Guitarist Joe Gosney, also ex-Black Peaks, and bassist Rory McLean, Rabea's friend of 15 years, soon joined. All they needed was a frontman.

"Joe was on tour with Palm Reader and mentioned in passing that we were looking for a singer," remembers Rabea. "Josh [McKeown] raised his hand."

**IN SHORT**  
**SOUNDS LIKE:**  
Fiercely catchy metal songs, built off the back of experimental ideas

**FOR FANS OF:**  
Thrice,  
Black Peaks,  
Palm Reader

**LISTEN TO:**  
*Shroud*

It was fortuitous timing, as Palm Reader were on the cusp of breaking up as well. "From the outside, it does look like I sacked off Palm Reader for Vower," Josh admits. "But me and my partner had just had a baby girl. That was the biggest contributor to Palm Reader ending."

Given their pedigree, Vower's debut single, *Shroud*, was met with curiosity and excitement on release in April 2024. That hype snowballed with EP *Apricity*'s arrival that July, alongside some summer festival slots, and the band went on to sell out their first headline shows at London's

The Dome and The Lower Third that December.

"It's still blowing our minds, the response and the growth," says Josh. "It doesn't even feel like we're at the crest of the wave! There's still so many people discovering us on a daily basis, and it's kind of jaw-dropping."

**APRICITY IS OUT NOW. VOWER'S UK TOUR STARTS IN GLASGOW ON FEBRUARY 7**



# HOARD ALMIGHTY

Box sets, underground oddities and all the essential merch you need this month



## COHEED AND CAMBRIA BOX SET

**£135**

**THE ONLY THING** madder than Coheed And Cambria's whirling symphonic prog is the level of world-building that underpins it all. And the only thing madder than that? Probably the stuff they've been chucking in their limited-edition Vaxis box sets. This third instalment continues the band's long-running Amory Wars saga, and lurking within the fancy, foil-stamped box you'll find a copy of the *Father Of Make Believe* CD alongside a 96-page novella and poster. So far so standard, but there's also a light-up replica of the Blind Side Sonny character's helmet and 'neuro-dynamic display goggles'. This item is, apparently, "fully wearable", and we'd *really* love to be a fly on the wall at your local A&E, hearing you explain precisely what they are and just how they came to be stuck on your silly bonce.

[tinyurl.com/vaxisiii-box](http://tinyurl.com/vaxisiii-box)



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Pull harder on the seams of your t-shirt... until it comes off and you can replace it with this collab one. The bundle also comes with an issue of *Metal Hammer* featuring a variant cover. Get it before it's gone, so tears don't fall. [tinyurl.com/bullettriv](http://tinyurl.com/bullettriv)



### SLEEP TOKEN LAMP

**£56.99**

Bit ironic that a band worshipping sleep should be shilling the kind of kit that'll keep you up and reading *Hammer* into the wee small hours, no? Nice nod to the band's iconic third album, though.

[tinyurl.com/sleep-lamp](http://tinyurl.com/sleep-lamp)



### LAMB OF GOD VINYL & SIGNED PRINT

**£34.99**

Last year marked 20 *actual* years since Lamb Of God released *Ashes Of The Wake*. Rage about the state of the world while listening to this special anniversary edition and looking at your lovely art card signed by the band. [tinyurl.com/ashes-vinyl](http://tinyurl.com/ashes-vinyl)

**MANTAR T-SHIRT**

£21

Valentine's Day means two things: supping bitter milk from capitalism's teat, and the release of Mantar's *Post Apocalyptic Depression*. This crudely daubed tee is at least preferable to one featuring the creepy kid on the album art.

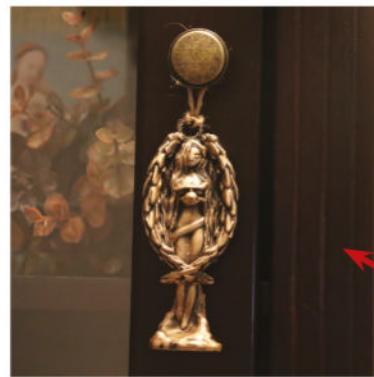
[tinyurl.com/mantar-top](http://tinyurl.com/mantar-top)

**WITCH KINGS RUM LIQUEUR**

£20

Celebrate Pagan festivals in style with a glug (or two) of this bewitching potion. Combining artisan rum with strawberries, zesty lemon and a nip of chilli, it's the perfect way to banish the lingering winter chill.

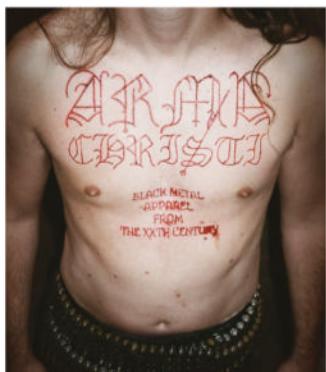
[tinyurl.com/witch-liqueur](http://tinyurl.com/witch-liqueur)

**LILITH ORNAMENT**

£24

Baby-stealing night-hag, Wiccan icon or goddess of independence? Whichever way you read her, Lilith is pretty damn cool. Now you can hang her in your garden, use her for a key fob, or whatever.

[tinyurl.com/lilith-lives](http://tinyurl.com/lilith-lives)

**ARMA CHRISTI BOOK**

£40

Coffee table books seldom feature 'JESUS IS A CUNT' spreads. Funny, that. *Arma Christi*'s packed with hundreds of vintage, rare-as-hens'-teeth black metal shirts, 90% of which you absolutely can't wear outside.

[tinyurl.com/arma-christi](http://tinyurl.com/arma-christi)

**SKINDRED NEWPORT COUNTY SHIRT**

£45 / £50

Skindred are the quintessential party band. Newport County are... middle of League Two. Celebrate heavy metal, football and love of all kinds by whipping this round your head when prompted by the 'Dred's Benji Webbe.

[tinyurl.com/skindred-kit](http://tinyurl.com/skindred-kit)

**XENOMORPH MUG**

£17 / £24

Need a new mug for your piggin' tea break/commercial space hauling mission? We're not sure if ceramic can withstand acidic alien blood, but this xenomorphically ergonomic cup looks ideal for your office's subpar coffee.

[tinyurl.com/break-over-man](http://tinyurl.com/break-over-man)

**MISANTROPE T-SHIRT**

£22

Normal People Scare Me t-shirt not having the desired effect? Give antisocialism a makeover with this oh-so-subtle tee: the chompy ouroboros, obnoxious text and agog skullies are poised to lance social contact like a boil.

[tinyurl.com/nihil-tee](http://tinyurl.com/nihil-tee)

**IRON MAIDEN FUNKO POP!**

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Part of being a Maiden nut is hoarding a bevy of band-branded goodies. Lord it over your part-timer pals as they scratch their heads, fruitlessly trying to place your *Nights Of The Dead* Eddie Funko Pop!.

[tinyurl.com/eddie-pops](http://tinyurl.com/eddie-pops)

**THY ART IS MURDER SCARF**

£28.99

Sorry, folks, summer is still a loooong way off. Take your mum's advice for once in your life and wrap up nice and warm so you don't catch a chill. She probably wasn't picturing this TAIM number when she said that, mind...

[tinyurl.com/taim-scarf](http://tinyurl.com/taim-scarf)

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SPIRITBOX

# A Rising



A viral video. Collabs with Megan Thee Stallion. Stadium shows with Korn and Bring Me The Horizon.

And now, stunning new album *Tsunami Sea*. There's just no stopping Spiritbox

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS

PICTURES: JONATHAN WEINER



tide

**E**xperts have long known the Pacific Northwest is a ticking time bomb. For decades, millions living in the stretch from Canada's British Columbia to the state of California have been warned about 'The Big One', an 8.0- or 9.0-magnitude super-earthquake destined to trigger a massive tsunami, which will unleash hell right down the coast. And unfortunately, the science tells us it's not a matter of if... but when.

Bang in the path of destruction is Vancouver Island, located 60 miles west of Vancouver, across the Strait of Georgia. The island's capital, Victoria, is the hometown of vocalist Courtney LaPlante and her husband, guitarist Mike Stringer. It's the place where they masterminded Spiritbox, one of the most hyped and exciting metal bands of the last decade.

Mike was born on the island, and Courtney moved there when she was 15. Both grew up hearing warnings about the tsunami, living under the threat of its looming shadow.

"It's something that is always in the back of our heads," Courtney admits.

Spiritbox have tapped into that existential dread on the band's emotionally charged and massively anticipated second album, *Tsunami Sea*. Combining tech metal, metalcore and nu metal with huge, dense waves of kaleidoscopic and ethereal melody alongside Courtney's silky-to-explosive vocals, the record is riddled with anxiety and shaped by the duo's experience growing up on Vancouver Island.

"Courtney, the daughter and sister and friend, loves it, but Courtney the artist doesn't have a fantastic time there," explains Courtney.

Her concept of home is a complex one. Having moved to Vancouver Island from Alabama as a teenager, it was the place she found herself, discovering her love for heavy music and realising her ambitions of becoming a musician. But to become successful, she knew she'd need to leave eventually. She points out that to get off the island, the options are to take a flight or a ferry to the mainland, an extra, expensive layer of admin that made their lofty ambitions with Spiritbox feel unachievable.

## “PLAYING A STADIUM IN BRAZIL MADE US FEEL FAMOUS!”

COURTNEY LAPLANTE

“Everyone feels like their hometown is isolating if it's a small town, but ours is figuratively and literally isolating.”

You can hear the ocean throughout *Tsunami Sea*, particularly on atmospheric album closer *Deep End*. It's a deliberate stylistic choice, says Mike, intended to conjure a sense of beauty and trepidation.

“I love layering. I love stacking and making a lot of the ambience. We utilised a lot of nature sounds, whether it was rain, waves, wind... And that's supposed to be very symbolic of the island.”

On *No Loss, No Love*, they paint the island as a “venus flytrap”; naturally breathtaking but suffocating, a place that will devour your dreams unless you escape, with the lyrics: *I was surrounded by pearls that I couldn't eat and diamonds I couldn't drink / An island that breathes is a body that eats'*

Spiritbox (left to right): Josh Gilbert, Zev Rose, Courtney LaPlante, Mike Stringer





"It's beautiful, it's incredible, and I can see why people never leave," adds Mike, who began leaving his hometown to tour with bands on the mainland when he was 16. "Then there's other people that unfortunately are stuck. The island is very much a bubble, so there is a feeling of, 'What am I doing? Where am I going from here?'"

We can't help but wonder who in their right mind would choose to live somewhere like this.

"Even with all that in mind, Vancouver Island is one of the most sought-after real estate markets in Canada," shrugs Mike. "You can't get a condo for less than almost a million bucks. People pay that to live in this area because it's gorgeous, but then in the back of your mind, you're like, 'If the earthquake happens, we're all screwed.'"

Courtney laughs ironically. "The tagline for Victoria is, 'It's for the newlywed and the nearly dead.'"

**T**hese days, Courtney and Mike live in LA, dialling into this interview via Zoom from their bright apartment. The room is stacked with musical equipment, while framed posters of sold-out Spiritbox shows are displayed proudly on the walls.

It didn't take long for Spiritbox to outgrow Vancouver Island. After Courtney and Mike's previous band – the mathy, jarring iwrrestledabearonce – split in 2016, the pair headed home and put their heads together. They wanted to form a band that didn't tick boxes, making music that was fluid, lush and heavy, and impervious to genre boundaries. Things soon hit warp speed. In 2020, their nu metal banshee anthem *Holy Roller* went viral, while the following year's debut album, *Eternal Blue*, landed amid a frenzy of hype and expectation. Subsequent EPs – the Garbage/Britpop-tinged *Rotoscope* (2022) and *The Fear Of Fear* (2023), which showcased the band at their most rabid and melodic – nailed their signature sound and confirmed they weren't afraid to chuck in the odd curveball.

Tours with Ghost and Slipknot only raised their profile further. It no longer made sense to pay out for Airbnbs and flights back and forth between Vancouver Island and LA, so Courtney and Mike made the move. Now, the pair are happy and settled. LA, the city where their record label, Pale Chord, is based, feels very much like home, a hub where the band can thrive. Today they're chatty and relaxed, dressed casually – Courtney in a Korn long-sleeve, a white beanie covering her long black hair, and Mike in a grey hoodie, his hair bleached a shocking blond.

"My team's become my biggest friend group," says Courtney. "When I'm back in Canada, sometimes it's hard for me to find other friends that relate to what I'm doing."

Last year, former As I Lay Dying bassist Josh Gilbert joined their ranks – his vocals have added an extra layer of oomph to the mix on *Tsunami Sea* – completing a line-up that also includes drummer Zev Rose, and their career has continued to skyrocket. A few weeks ago, along with Motionless In White and The Plot In You, the band supported fellow genre-mashers Bring Me The Horizon at a sold-out show at Allianz Parque stadium in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in front of 55,000 people. It was BMTH's biggest headlining show to date, never mind Spiritbox's. The crowd was biblical.

"It was unlike anything I've ever experienced," smiles Mike. "Once the first flare went off, I was like, 'Oh, shit, this is insane!'"

Courtney smiles. "It made us feel famous!"

*Tsunami Sea* was produced by Mike and *Eternal Blue* producer Dan Braunstein, mixed by Zakk Cervini (Limp Bizkit/BMTH/Poppy), and mastered by Ted Jensen (Mastodon/Halestorm). One person who wasn't on the production team was ex-Bring Me The Horizon member and producer Jordan Fish, whom Courtney and Mike met up with for a casual, three-day writing session in January 2024. When Mike uploaded a behind the scenes, in-the-studio photograph to his social media, it led to rampant online reports that Fish was producing the band's second album. The band had to come out and clarify the situation, but have said they would love to collaborate with the producer in the future.

There's plenty of melody on *Tsunami Sea* – the dreamy title track and misty utopia of *A Haven With Two Faces* contain the band's most euphoric choruses to date, but fans will be happy to hear Spiritbox haven't gone too soft. In its heaviest moments, *Tsunami Sea* goes much harder than *Eternal Blue*. The album's first single was *Soft Spine*, a monstrous, tech metal ass-beater, which Courtney has taken to dedicating onstage to "Everybody that I love to fucking hate." It was the path that felt most authentic to them.

"We'll always try to be what I call 'hilariously heavy,'" says Mike. "I think we kind of hit a sweet spot with the heavy stuff on this record, where it's familiar but it's a step forward."

What they'll never do is stand still musically.

"Statistically, if I was to look at the song that broke us out, *Holy Roller*, it would be more financially stable to just continue only making that," continues Courtney. "I love an identity crisis, because it helps me not feel like I'm trapped in a box where I have to do this or that."

The biggest surprise on *Tsunami Sea* is the track *Crystal Roses*. Building to an ecstatic peak on a rush of synths, it's a ravey trip that befits Mike and Courtney's initial vision of fluidity; the freedom to take Spiritbox wherever the hell they like.

"Each record is a small time capsule; maybe the next album will lean more into the melodic stuff or maybe we'll have more electronic sounds or whatever," considers Courtney. "I think it just comes down to whatever we're interested in at the time. And if that means that we're genre-less or we just are unpredictable in that way, so be it."

She finds some of the more territorial, tribal attitudes in metal baffling.

"I think there's an anxiety within the metal community, like abandonment issues. Like, if a single comes out and it's soft, this band are now betraying me and moving on to something else."

When it comes to songwriting, the band write "selfishly," for themselves, not the fans.

"It has to be like that, because otherwise we'll just go crazy trying to focus-group what people want."

**I**t's a mindset that's led to several exciting collaborations over the last few years, with artists from right across the metal spectrum, many of them women. At Louder Than Life Festival last September, they brought out rising metalcore star Poppy for *Soft Spine* and Jinjer's Tatiana Shmayluk for *Circle With Me*. The latter performance was particularly formidable... and wasn't even rehearsed.

"That was our first time ever interacting with one another," says Courtney. "The first time I saw Tati was when she was ready to come up onstage and do the set.

## "TATIANA FROM JINJER SOUNDED LIKE A DEMON"

MIKE STRINGER

Those people don't need to rehearse, they just walk out. She could have done three hours like that and sounded good the whole time."

"Having her in my ears was nuts," adds Mike. "She sounded like a demon."

In October, after folk metal singer Chelsea Wolfe performed a sparse cover of Spiritbox's *Cellar Door* on the BBC Radio 1 Rock Show, Courtney invited her onstage to perform single *Jaded* with the band at Korn's 30th anniversary show in LA. In an industry where women are perennially pitted against one another, it's important to Courtney to support and work with other female artists.

"There can only be one of us that's the best one, when in reality, none of us ever think about that," she says, in reference to the outdated attitude of allowing space for one female artist instead of accepting that they can co-exist. "We are all multifaceted musicians, just like all of our male counterparts are, but they never get questioned about that."

Spiritbox's biggest gamble came later that month, when they appeared on *TYG*, a track on rapper Megan Thee Stallion's 2024 album, *Megan: Act II*. (The band previously appeared on a remix of Megan's track *Cobra* in 2023.) *TYG* sounds like two worlds colliding, with Megan diving headfirst into the metal vibe and Courtney adding ferocious backing vocals over clipped drums, crunchy guitars and gold-plated synths. It was put together remotely in just two days, forcing slower-paced, self-confessed perfectionists Courtney and Mike out of their comfort zone.

"We'll overthink something for, like, two months. They're like, 'That sounds great. Let's get it out!'" says Courtney of Megan and her team's spontaneous approach.

She did eventually meet the rapper, later in LA. "I was emotionally moved by watching her interact with her fans, and then the fact that she's an incredible rapper and dancer is icing on the cake."

As the band's profile has rocketed, Spiritbox have had to consider how they interact with their own fans. "Things used to be more casual," Courtney admits.

She enjoys the "deep relationship" she shares with Spiritbox fans, even following some of them online herself, but is hyper-aware of parasocial relationships that can develop on social media, stating it "is not healthy for me and it's not healthy for the fan".

"I really do care about them, but I also don't want to play a role in their life I don't deserve, where I'm influencing them too much, at best," she explains. "And then, at worst, ▶"

Courtney is a girl's girl



## Girls to the front

From her guest spot with rapper Megan Thee Stallion to live performances with her heavy peers, Courtney explains why she loves collabing with other female artists



**MEGAN THEE STALLION**  
*Cobra (Rock Remix)*,  
2023 / *TYG*, *Megan: Act II*, 2024

"Aside from her talent, the thing I love most about her is she's a really special person. I caught on to her pretty early on, and I saw what a special connector of a person she is in the way that she adores her fans. It's cool that a good person has reached such heights, and overcome so much adversity [Megan has spoken out about losing her parents, assault and online harassment, among other subjects], and still remains really positive and confident."



**POPPY**  
*Soft Spine, at Louder Than Life, Louisville, Kentucky*, September 2024

"To call Poppy just a vocalist isn't enough. She's not a vocalist. She's like a renaissance woman. She's a creative director. I could see her out onstage calling for a circle pit with Knocked Loose and being the creative director of a fashion house and host of a TV show and also becoming a professional dancer and writing a ballet. She could be a runway model. She can be whatever the fuck she wants."



**TATIANA SHMAYLUK (JINJER)**  
*Circle With Me, at Louder Than Life, Louisville, Kentucky*, September 2024

"She's a really nice, cool, humble person. She's such a hard worker and I so admire her technical ability. When you sing and scream, it's really challenging, and anyone else that does it knows. The fact that she can scream like that and go do her own set, that was nothing to her. Only if I practise could I be as technically proficient as her. She's just effortlessly perfect."



**CHELSEA WOLFE**  
*Jaded*, at Korn's 30th anniversary show at BMO Stadium, LA, October 2024

"Chelsea was like, 'I'm coming to the show,' and I was like, 'You're singing with me!' And, oh my God, to hear her voice in our ears while we're playing it! Chelsea Wolfe is one of my favourite ever musicians. I think she is just getting started on her journey. For lyrics, [she is in the same league as] Kate Bush and Sade. I love her writing and she's such a fantastic musician."

it breeds entitlement. And just like anything in my life, I need boundaries.”

That entitlement took an ugly turn earlier this year. Spiritbox were in Europe supporting Korn when they heard the news their former bassist, Bill Crook, who had amicably left the band in 2022, had passed away.

“I don’t need to tell you that finding that out was the worst thing that’s ever happened to us in our lives,” says Courtney quietly.

Shocked and devastated, they wanted to drop out of the Korn dates, but powered on, trying to process their grief privately. A minority of fans were critical of the way they handled the situation.

“It felt like people were unhappy that we didn’t post [on social media] immediately upon Bill’s passing,” Courtney continues. “It made me think a lot about performative grieving. I don’t mean performative like, ‘You don’t feel that way.’ I mean it’s literally a performance. We’re here grieving, but then there’s this attitude of ‘You must perform your grief.’”

The experience was an eye-opener, a hard lesson in the modern realities and expectations of celebrity.

“It really shook us,” says Mike. “Like, ‘Oh, my God, if you don’t press a button on an app, that means to the outside world that you don’t care, when in reality, this is the worst day of my life.’”

*Tsunami Sea* was completed long before Bill’s death, but his presence looms large over the record.

“We still think about him in decision-making to the point where we thought we should put out *Perfect Soul* as a single,” smiles Mike. “Bill probably would have liked that song the most, because Bill loved butt rock riffs, and to me, the beginning of that song is so, like, Nickelback-butt-rocky...”

“You’re really selling it, Michael!” Courtney cuts in, dryly.

“No, no, I love that!” Mike protests. “Nickelback are one of my favourite bands!”

Like *Eternal Blue*, much of *Tsunami Sea* sees Courtney exploring the feelings of depression and anxiety she’s experienced all her life. The album title, she says, is “the perfect description of what it feels like to be engulfed in your own emotions and in sadness”.

“Everything Michael writes either has this tension in it, or the guitar has this melancholy to it that invokes sad feelings about myself,” she says. “I think a lot of the time, art is a need people have, to have people understand them, so, I think it will help people understand me a little bit better. It makes me feel like I’m better understanding myself, too.”

Saying that, during the writing and recording process, a wave of depression hit her hard, and she found herself overcome with feelings of guilt. To an outsider, her life was great. She and Mike had just got a new puppy called Spaghetti. She was loving her life living in LA, surrounded by friends. The band were playing the biggest shows of their career, travelling all over the world. Why did she feel like this when she was living her dream?

“This album is a peek into those dark feelings you have, and you almost feel ashamed that you’re being such a freaking baby about stuff, you know?” she says. “I was really going through a really rough time when I was recording it. The screaming parts were letting out a lot of anger, but the singing parts made me really sad.”

She casts an appreciative glance over at her partner. “But it’s just a part of my personality, and I’m so lucky I have Michael to help me go through all that.”

While Courtney admits she is still often overwhelmed by intrusive feelings of imposter syndrome, likening her depression to a tide that “ebbs and flows”, when she’s onstage she’s at her most confident. That’s been a work in progress. Compare some of Spiritbox’s recent live performances with earlier shows, when nerves were palpable, and her growth as a live performer is clear to see. In footage of their show at Chicago’s Credit Union 1 Amphitheatre, supporting Korn, along with Gojira, on their North American tour, she’s never looked more comfortable or commanding, joking with the 28,000-strong crowd. Meanwhile, the band cite the tour as a career-so-far highlight, when they could sense the momentum around the band continuing to build.

“Those shows were beyond any drug that you could take,” says Mike happily. “We’ve done tours in the past where we’ve been the opening act, and we call it ‘being the Hot Dog Band’, where people are getting their beers and their hot dogs and they’re walking in when we’re halfway through. But on this tour, there was a shift where it felt like people were coming in early and they were making sure to check us out.”

With *Tsunami Sea* set to drop on March 7, Spiritbox are eyeing up what will surely be their biggest year yet. The band have been nominated for their second Grammy Award for Best Metal Performance, for 2023 single *Cellar Door* (they were also nominated in 2023 for the track *Jaded*, although they lost out to Metallica’s *72 Seasons*).

This year, the competition is no less fierce, as they’re up against Knocked Loose and Poppy’s collab *Suffocate*, and Gojira, Marina Viotti & Victor Le Masne’s *Mea Culpa (Ah! Ça ira)* – the song they performed at the 2024 Olympic Opening Ceremony among a crowd of beheaded Marie Antoinettes. As honoured as she is to be nominated, Courtney is looking at the bigger picture.

“If we, Gojira or Knocked Loose win, then a woman will win a metal Grammy, which would be really cool.”

In February, Spiritbox will headline London’s 10,250-capacity Alexandra Palace, traditionally the final stepping stone in the UK before bands graduate to arena-level shows, as part of a tour with Loathe, Dying Wish and Gel. In June, they will support the wildly successful new iteration of Linkin Park at a sold-out Wembley Stadium, as well as playing Download, a festival many fans and industry folk think they could headline in future. With heights this dizzying, it’s easy to forget the band have just one full-length record and one headline UK tour under their belts. As far as they’re concerned, the hard work is just beginning.

“We still have so much to prove, and I’m really hoping that people can hear that in this record,” says Mike. “We care so much about every facet of it – sonically, visually, the artwork, everything entwined with the story. I hope that people like it enough that we’ll be able to make another record...”

“We’re just getting started!” adds Courtney. “We make it a joke, but deep down, the goal is world domination.”

**SPIRITBOX PLAY LONDON’S ALEXANDRA PALACE ON FEBRUARY 13.  
TSUNAMI SEA IS OUT ON MARCH 7 VIA PALE CORD / RISE RECORDS**

## “I WAS MOVED BY WATCHING MEGAN THEE STALLION INTERACT WITH HER FANS”

COURTNEY LAPLANTE

Nothing less than world domination  
will do for Spiritbox



## "I hate so many people!"

Courtney and Mike's track-by-track guide to *Tsunami Sea*

### Fata Morgana

*A rabid opener that immediately plunges us into a world much darker than anything on Eternal Blue.*

**Mike:** "I would describe *Fata Morgana* as the mission statement of the album. It just comes out swinging, and it is very, very heavy."

### Black Rainbow

*Three and a half minutes of bleak and mechanical tech metal, the pits aren't going to know what's hit them this summer.*

**Mike:** "I would say it's a continuation of *Fata Morgana* and probably the heaviest song on the record."

**Courtney:** "Black Rainbow is FREAKY!"

### Perfect Soul

*Calling to mind Architects' Doomsday, this is Spiritbox at their most ethereal and melodic.*

**Courtney:** "It's like a little bit of hopefulness. The first part of the album that has a little bit of

hopefulness and yearning in it, and not just anger and sadness."

### Keep Sweet

*Evoking Keep Sweet: Pray And Obey, a sordid Netflix documentary about the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, this is the perfect blend of beauty and brutality.*

**Mike:** "It's fun and very catchy. That's one of my favourites..."

**Courtney:** "... but it's extremely bitter. It's a bitter taste in your mouth – a great way of trying to have someone who isn't a woman empathise with what it feels like to be a woman."

### Soft Spine

*Drenched in nightmarish dread, 'You all deserve each other!' is already one of 2025's finest mosh calls.*

**Mike:** "Hater song."

**Courtney:** "I hate so many people. People think I'm so positive or, rather, neutral. No! I'm not neutral. I just don't want to be dunking

on people that I fucking hate online."

**Mike:** "So we made a song about it."

### Tsunami Sea

*Instantly recognisable as the work of its creators, atmospheric and emotional – the title track is quintessential Spiritbox.*

**Courtney:** "It's the feelings of never being good enough and the sad part is that it's by your own standards of why you will never feel good enough... and sinking down into depression."

**Mike:** "I'd say it was the sister song of *Eternal Blue*."

### A Haven With Two Faces

*A bittersweet love letter to their home, indebted to Deftones with a gorgeous, silky chorus.*

**Courtney:** "It's about Vancouver Island. It's the haven with two faces."

**Mike:** "This was us adventuring back to our roots in a more proggy direction. It's a wild ride and it's long."

### No Loss, No Love

*Explosive and off-kilter, the 'weird kid' of the album picks up where *Eternal Blue's* Yellowjacket left off.*

**Mike:** "That would be 'experimental heavy'. It's very close to *Holy Roller* in a sense, as far as how quick the song is and how relentless it is. It's a wild one."

### Crystal Roses

*Rave vibes! This trancy, electronic-heavy track hints at an intriguing future direction.*

**Mike:** "It's an experimental song we've always wanted to make, and it happened very organically, and I'm very proud of that one."

**Courtney:** "I think it's a new side of our band."

### Ride The Wave

*Spiritbox have made massive walls of sound their calling card, and this track boasts a stonker, with one hell of a breakdown.*

**Mike:** "Ride The Wave is another song that I've



always wanted to make. It's very inspired by *28 Days Later* instrumentally. It has my favourite chorus on the record."

**Courtney:** "This is the first song that I tracked vocals to, and you couldn't feel my sadness and melancholy in the takes that I did. It has a bit of a fun march to it, you can dance a little to it, but it's sad."

### Deep End

*Hitting like the breath of life after surfacing from the deep, *Tsunami Sea's* serene closer shimmers with hope.*

**Courtney:** "We wrote *Deep End* before Bill passed, but that song now, to me, is my beacon to him."

LIMP BIZKIT



WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS

Epic live shows, celebrity love-ins and Dad Vibes - Limp Bizkit are officially one of metal's biggest bands once more. This is the story of...

# The Durstnais

LIMP BIZKIT

sance



hey used to do it all for the nookie, but now Limp Bizkit are all about the love. That much was abundantly clear on March 17, 2024, at Lollapalooza Argentina.

"Is everybody happy?" singer Fred Durst asks, surveying a 100,000-strong crowd who seem

down with the fact that he's wearing the kind of garish, multicoloured tracksuit once the preserve of 1980s kids TV presenter Timmy Mallett.

He soon gets his response. As Limp Bizkit tear into set-closer *Break Stuff*, the audience go ballistic, bellowing the lyrics so loudly it drowns out Fred as a sea of bodies bounce and mosh as far as the eye can see. Footage of the craziness soon goes viral, notching up more than a million views in 24 hours. Nearly a quarter of a century after their nu metal heyday, that Lollapalooza performance proved that Limp Bizkit were one of metal's hottest bands once again.

It's an unlikely second act, and one that would once have seemed unthinkable. At the turn of the millennium, Limp Bizkit were the biggest nu metal band on the planet, thanks to the massive success of their first three albums, 1997's *Three Dollar Bill, Y'All*, 1999's *Significant Other* and 2000's *Chocolate Starfish And The Hot Dog Flavored Water*. There were album launch parties at the Playboy Mansion, promo videos shot on top of The World Trade Center, and *Mission: Impossible* theme songs.

But it couldn't last. Limp Bizkit – and Fred in particular – became the whipping boys for a scene deemed obnoxious, misogynistic and artistically bereft. Guitarist Wes Borland quit in 2001, done with the circus that surrounded the band. Their fourth record, 2003's critically mauled *Results May Vary*, was a relative commercial flop. At gig supporting Metallica in Chicago in 2003, Fred was heckled offstage by a hostile audience after just six songs. They reunited with Wes for 2005's *The Unquestionable Truth (Part 1)* EP, but their glory days seemed to be behind them.

That makes their current turnaround remarkable. While resurgent interest in nu metal, and the nostalgia that comes with it, has undoubtedly played a part, that doesn't fully account for the fervour from fans who weren't around for them first time around. In 2023, Fred appeared on the *Club Random* podcast, hosted by veteran comedian and TV presenter Bill Maher.

"These days, every night I'll say, 'How many people is it your first time seeing Limp Bizkit?' The whole place raises their hand," the singer told Bill. "'How many people are under 30 years old?' The whole place raises their hand... It's young people who are reacting to the material."

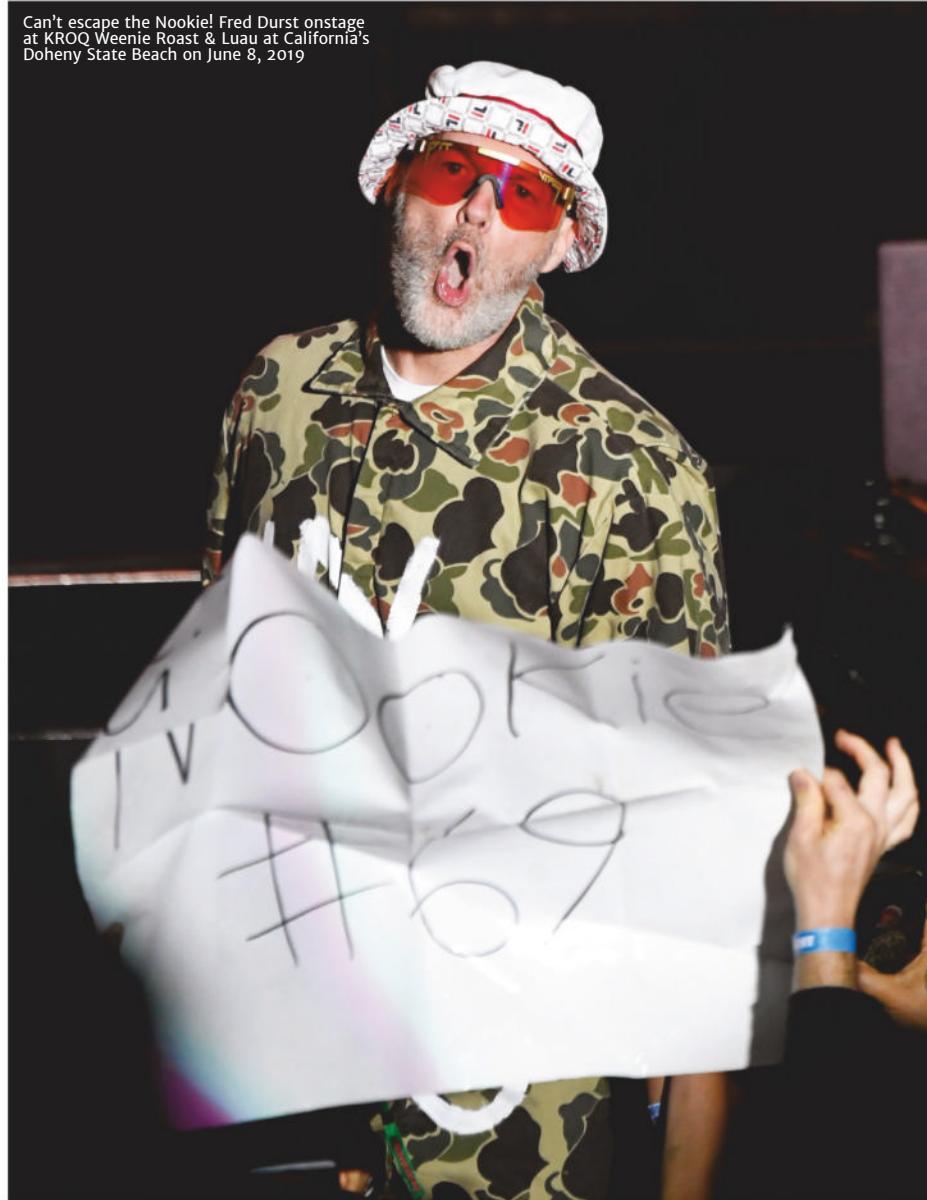
For Spookz, frontman with masked nu metal revivalists and former Limp Bizkit support act Blackgold, it's a matter of timing.

"It's a generational thing," he tells *Hammer*. "The gap is the perfect amount now for the kids just getting into music for their parents to be like, 'When I was young, these guys were sick,' and put them on in the car."

Ross Robinson, the legendary, game-changing producer who worked with the band on *Three Dollar Bill, Y'All*, has a simpler explanation.

"The reason they're so popular again today is the reason they blew up in the first place: because they're fucking incredible," he says. "They're a freaking cocktail of pure fire and creativity."

Can't escape the Nookie! Fred Durst onstage at KROQ Weenie Roast & Luau at California's Doheny State Beach on June 8, 2019



**T**he resurrection of Limp Bizkit has been a decade in the making. The band reunited in 2009 following a three-year hiatus, playing a blinder of a set at that year's Download festival in front of a rabid crowd chanting their name. 2011's comeback album, *Gold Cobra*, might have been clunky and forgettable, but their status as a live draw continued to build, especially in Europe, where they became semi-regular festival fixtures.

## “IT'S YOUNG PEOPLE WHO ARE REACTING TO THE MATERIAL”

FRED DURST

A much-trumpeted sixth album, *Stampede Of The Disco Elephants*, was constantly delayed, but that didn't matter. Limp Bizkit had well and truly come back in from the cold, cracking open the door for the return of nu metal in the process.

The Durstaissance was rubber-stamped in 2021 with the release of *Dad Vibes*, their first new song in seven years. It found Fred fully leaning into the song's

title: baggy t-shirts and baseball caps were out, replaced by middle age-appropriate grey slacks, grey wig and handlebar moustache, red aviator shades, and, at one gig in Tampa, Florida in 2022, a comfy chair in the middle of the stage.

Limp Bizkit (left to right): Wes Borland, DJ Lethal, Fred Durst, John Otto and Sam Rivers at the World Music Theatre in Tinley Park, Illinois on September 7, 1997



Sam, Wes, Lethal and Fred backstage at Lollapalooza, at Chicago's Grant Park on July 31, 2021



This was a funnier, more self-aware Fred Durst, one willing to embrace his age and status as a nu metal dad with only the barest whiff of irony.

"It's so Limp Bizkit to have a song about being a cool dad, but that's something that only Fred would think of," says Zakk Cervini, who produced *Dad Vibes* and parent album *Still Sucks*, which grew out of the long-gestating *Stampede Of The Disco Elephants*. "Bands I work with that were young 10 years ago are all having kids now. [Rage Against The Machine guitarist] Tom Morello was like, 'Oh, you produced *Dad Vibes*? I do a radio show, and every Father's Day we play that song, that's one of my favourite songs.'"

Released on Halloween 2021 with little advance fanfare, the 12-song, 32-minute *Still Sucks* may not have had the sales or widespread cultural impact of *Significant Other* or *Chocolate Starfish And The Hot Dog Flavored Water*, but old- and new-school Bizkit fans lapped it up.

Since then, the love for the band has only intensified. Limp Bizkit's triumphant appearance at 2024's Download festival was widely held up as the best of the weekend, while celebrity fan Ed Sheeran joined the band onstage at last year's Pinkpop festival for a duet on their cover of The Who's *Behind Blue Eyes* (a collab Fred dubbed 'Fred Sheeran' on Instagram).

It's not just old-school fans and early-2000s nostalgists who are behind this resurgence in interest. Gen Z has latched onto the sound and aesthetics of nu metal, with TikTok and social media allowing younger fans to enjoy Bizkit without the baggage and bias that clung to them in the early 2000s. Zakk Cervini draws parallels between the band and current pop superstars.

"When I look at artists like Charli XCX or Billie Eilish, their aesthetics are baggy pants and bright green," he says. "It's so colourful and outlandish. It's meant to be a party."

The Fred Durst of the 2020s is a world away from the Fred Durst of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Back then, sporting an ever-present red baseball cap, he was one of the main reasons Limp Bizkit were held in contempt in certain quarters. Whether it was his obnoxious swagger – embodied by the band's infamous appearance at the Woodstock '99 festival – or the spats he found himself embroiled in with everyone from Eminem to Corey Taylor (Fred described Slipknot fans as "a bunch of fat, ugly kids"), for many he encapsulated the worst aspects of nu metal.

He's since insisted that his obnoxious persona was a character that got out of hand. He subsequently spoke of



Fully embracing those Dad Vibes!

## “LIMP BIZKIT ARE A COCKTAIL OF PURE FIRE AND CREATIVITY”

ROSS ROBINSON

being bullied in his youth, and that Limp Bizkit were his chance to release that residual aggression and frustration.

“When I became that Tyler Durden guy, there were just no rules,” he told *Metal Hammer* in 2014, referencing Brad Pitt’s provocative character in the 1999 film *Fight Club*. “I was carrying this giant person behind me on a chain.... I can’t get away from it and that persona ate me up.”

These days, Fred cuts a very different character. Onstage, he’s full of smiles and grateful thanks. It feels like he’s more likely to make you a cuppa and a biscuit than start a riot or shit-talk the competition.

“I think the journey of going up and down and up and down makes any artist humble, and he’s got such humble swag when he’s onstage,” says Blackgold’s Spookz. “He makes you feel like you’re with your best mate. He’s so grateful that it’s come back around.”

This humility extends to giving a hand-up to a new generation of bands. As well as Blackgold, Limp Bizkit have taken metalcore crew Dying Wish, rave-metal provocateurs Wargasm and hardcore newcomers Scowl out on tour with them. In many cases, he handpicks the band, contacting them directly himself.

“He saw us on TikTok and ended up in our DMs,” says Spookz. “If he hears a new band and he thinks they’re sick, he’s like, ‘I’m going to take you on tour, I’m going to help you.’ Take nothing for it. No reason. That’s just what he’s like.”

GETTY/KEVIN WINTER

**F**red Durst’s public image isn’t the only thing that has been misunderstood over the years. According to both Ross Robinson and Zakk Cervini, his creative skills have been overlooked and underappreciated.

“We put together nine songs from scratch in seven days at pre-production for the first record,” recalls Ross of working on *Three Dollar Bill, Y’All*. “I’ve never experienced that level of creativity my whole career. Idea after idea after idea, and they were all really good.”

Zakk says that was the case on *Still Sucks* too. The producer describes his time working with the band as a series of “lightning in a bottle” moments.

“Fred is one of the most talented people that I’ve ever met in my entire life. His voice is just so iconic and so signature. With a lot of artists, you have to work to make them sound the way they sound, but Fred jumps on the mic and it automatically sounds sick.”

Recording the album’s opening track, *Out Of Style*, was a case in point.

“Fred was like, ‘All right, I got my lyrics. I’m going to lay it down,’ ” says Zakk. “He recorded the entire song staring me in the face with the mic a foot away from me. It was this crazy hour of him in my face, screaming at me.”

It helps that the instability that has plagued the band has calmed down in recent years. Wes Borland has quit the band on two separate occasions, returning both times, while DJ Lethal and bassist Sam Rivers have both left and returned to the band since 2012. The current line-up – also the band’s classic line-up – has been together since 2019.

“Fred is there for his dudes ’til death,” says Ross Robinson. That renewed sense of camaraderie is palpable on *Still Sucks*.

“I remember Fred bouncing ideas off of Sam back and forth being just like, ‘Do you like this? Am I going too far on this? Is this good?’ ” says Zakk. “Sam would keep everybody grounded. Then Lethal would just come in with all his sounds and all his turntables and they’re like, ‘Does it sound too dated?’ To me, that sounds fresh. For so many people of my generation, that’s a new thing for them.”

For Ross Robinson, Limp Bizkit’s current popularity is no surprise. It all goes back to the music.

“It’s the beat, sense of song and choruses,” he says. “I like to say, ‘When we go in the studio, we are going to build a fucking pyramid – something that lasts forever.’ I knew the first Limp Bizkit record was going to do something when I put the first CD I got from mastering in my Toyota 4Runner. I pinned it wide open, sliding around corners, catching a little air, just in the dirt doing donuts with the music, full blast, and it matched perfectly. I get chills even today when I hear it.”

The excitement that surrounded Limp Bizkit may have come and gone over the years, but the current love for them is comparable to that of the original nu metal era. Their ongoing (and self-deprecatingly titled) Loserville tour hits the UK and Ireland in March, while they’re reportedly back in the studio recording the follow-up to *Still Sucks*. The nu metal revival shows no sign of abating either. With 90s contemporaries Korn set to headline this year’s Download festival, it’s not unthinkable that Limp Bizkit could do the same in 2026.

It’s not clear how surprised Fred is by the success of his band’s second act. By the mid-2000s, it looked like they were over and done, a hangover of the nu metal years. Two decades on, they’ve clawed their way back to the top against all the odds. But then maybe this was all part of Fred Durst’s plan.

“I wanted to pull back and see what our music could do through a noisy world,” said Fred in 2023. “How do you rise above the noise? And luckily, I’m so grateful, there’s a resurgence and it’s happening.”

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LIMP BIZKIT’S LOSERVILLE TOUR BEGINS ON MARCH 8 IN GLASGOW

KILLSWITCH ENGAGE



THE HAMMER INTERVIEW

# JESSE LEACH

He's the son of a preacher man who went from hardcore Christianity to metalcore stardom with Killswitch Engage, and this is his life story so far

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • PICTURES: TRAVIS SHINN

KILLSWITCH ENGAGE



**T**here aren't many vocalists in the worlds of metal and hardcore like Jesse Leach. The Killswitch Engage frontman couldn't be further away from the stereotypical metalcore tough guy. For one thing, he's calling *Hammer* via Zoom not from a big city apartment but from his new home, tucked away in the woodlands in the Catskill Mountains, upstate New York.

"I can be alone here, in the middle of nowhere," he says. "I need to be close to nature."

Born in 1978 to a religious family that moved around the US, Jesse found his calling in the fertile late-90s Massachusetts hardcore scene. After playing in a series of local bands, he co-founded metalcore trailblazers Killswitch Engage in 1999, only to quit just after the release of their breakthrough second album, 2002's *Alive Or Just Breathing*. He spent a decade away from the band, but made an unexpected – and triumphant – return to Killswitch in 2012.

He's in a philosophical mood today, a few weeks ahead of the release of Killswitch's new album, *This Consequence*. His journey has seen him go from young kid raised in a strict Christian family to one of the most recognisable, committed frontmen around. It's a story that takes in questions of faith, mental health and an unexpected love of ambient techno.

#### What was your upbringing like?

"For the most part I had a pretty damn good childhood. My parents did a great job of masking our poverty from us. But a lot of my childhood was just three times a week at church. My father was studying to be a minister, so when I was very young, it was a lot of travelling to different churches, him and my mom trying to find the right spiritual home for us."

#### How did that affect you as a child?

"My brain was filled at a very young age with a lot of knowledge and Christian indoctrination. I often joke that my brother and I were like the Flanders kids from *The Simpsons*. My parents would wind us up with religious fervour and we'd go to, like, a family party or Christmas, and we'd be calling out our uncle for living in sin because he wasn't married to the woman he was with. Just really cringeworthy shit when you're four or five years old."

#### Were you allowed to listen to music?

"No. No secular music allowed in the house, no secular TV. I could only watch one show a week, and movies and cassette tapes had to be screened if they came into the house. My parents would read the lyrics first. I didn't break out of that until we eventually moved into public schools and started to co-mingle with the secular world. That was when things really started to change for me."

#### What was the first music to really make an impression on you during that time?

"People might chuckle over this, but it's true and I still love him today: Phil Collins was the first guy that I was allowed to listen to, because he was on popular radio in the 80s. When I would sneak to my friends' houses and see MTV, the first glimpses I had was stuff like Phil Collins. That was the initial, 'Oh, I like this guy. He's on the radio.' Def Leppard would have been the next one – *Hysteria* was the biggest thing in the world in 1987 for me."

#### When did you start discovering heavier music?

"My brother brought home a couple of tapes – he smuggled them in! One of them was Anthrax's *I'm The Man* and the

other was [Iron Maiden's] *The Number Of The Beast*. We were aged 10 or 11, and my parents would leave my brother and I at home to go to a Bible thing. We didn't have to go anymore, thankfully – we'd stay home and do our homework. The moment they would leave, those cassette tapes would go into the boombox and we would sing word for word."

#### Presumably *The Number Of The Beast* would be the last thing your parents would want to discover you listening to!

"Exactly! Fast forward to a couple of weeks later, my mother's cleaning my brother's room, lifting the mattress – back then the mattress was the place to hide all your stuff – and she finds it. During that time, with Satanic Panic, we knew the worst thing in the world you could do was bring in *The Number Of The Beast*. My dad took the tape in front of us, put it on the ground and smashed it: 'I'm forbidding Devil's music in my house!' But that only made it more appealing."

#### When did you start to question that religious upbringing?

"I was old enough where I was like, 'OK, now I'm skateboarding with my friends, now I'm listening to punk rock.' I dove deep into that community instead of going to church and Bible studies every week. I realised that all of that is based on what a human is writing and saying. If God is greater than all of that, how are we capturing that energy, that spirit, and homogenising it and translating it into words that other people can understand without completely reducing what the Great Spirit god energy is like? Faith is a beautiful thing. I have faith too. But it's not connected to a certain belief system."

#### So discovering punk rock changed everything for you?

"Yeah. Punk and hardcore is when I was like, 'This is me. I can identify with this.' I'll never forget the first time hearing Minor Threat – it blew my mind. I didn't even understand what was happening. I knew Metallica, but Minor Threat was different. It was angry, fast, pissed off, and when I honed in on the lyrics, it was like, 'Oh, they're talking about like bettering yourself, being free from alcohol and drugs' – stuff that I had already thought as an indoctrinated Christian kid. It felt very righteous to me. That's when I started to see the counterculture that was happening, and that's when I started to lean more towards that way."

#### When did you start your first band?

"Probably not even six months on from hearing Minor Threat. I had two friends that were into punk, and we started a band called Departure, and played our first show at a Halloween party in 1993. We covered *Unsung* by Helmet and *Seeing Red* by Minor Threat, and then had six originals. I still have the cassette tape somewhere. It's awful, but it was the first time where I was like, 'This is it. There's nothing cooler than this.'"

#### How quickly did you integrate into the hardcore scene?

"I was going to four local shows a week. My mom, to her credit, would drop me off at the clubs to see some of these bands because she saw that it really made me feel alive. I heard bands like Bad Brains, 7 Seconds, Youth Of Today, Earth Crisis, Strife, Unbroken. These were bands that had a really uplifting, positive message, and that kind of is what really sunk its teeth into me. I was like, 'This is it. Son of a preacher man is now a punk rock singer.' It was my religion."

#### Were you aware of how special that Massachusetts hardcore scene was?

"I look back on that and it was the glory days for me. Even before Killswitch, Adam [Dutkiewicz, lead guitar] and Joel

Jesse Leach: mental health champion

[Stroetzel, rhythm guitar] were in Aftershock, Mike [D'Antonio, bass] was in Overcast, you had a band like Candiria who mixed jazz and death metal. If it wasn't for that scene then I wouldn't even be here."

**Killswitch really put the scene on the global map with *Alive Or Just Breathing*. Was it weird getting all that attention?**

"I knew it was definitely blowing up. We went from playing to 30, 40, 50 people in the local scene to playing very large rooms, having people travel distances to see us. The moment we got signed and things started to happen, that's when people wanted my autograph. People wanted to grab a picture with me and it was like, 'What? That's wild.' It started to build social anxiety within me. I started to dread it."

**And that's what led to your departure from the band?**

"Yeah. Back then, I was a very insecure, social anxiety-ridden kid, who didn't have a total handle on my art. I started to get depressed. My anxiety was crippling me. I would hide out before the show, play the set, hide out after, not be sociable, not have fun, and that just started wearing thin on me. I felt very alone, I was having a rough time with my voice and my mental health. I became pretty much suicidal. I had the wherewithal at least to bail and get out of there. It sucked. I wish I would have done it better, but I knew no other way. Survival mode kicked in."

**That was in an era where discussions around mental health were far less common as well...**

"I did hold my cards close to my chest for a long time. Honestly, I was finding myself in the bottom of bottles, just drinking and numbing it, not even really being that self-aware. By the time I did come around to wanting to talk about it, I was just desperate for answers."

**How did you address it?**

"I remember going on my Myspace and posting a photo of me in the mirror, not looking that great, and saying, 'From now on, I'm going to start talking about this. I'm not OK and I want to hear from you, let's talk about this. Reach out.' I got people calling me a pussy and whatever. You kind of weave through all that, then you see the gems, the comments of someone who's like, 'I'm a firefighter... a big, tough guy... I've got issues. Thank you so much for speaking out.' This empowers me to want to talk more about it and that narrative."

**How have you learnt to cope with those issues over the years?**

"For the most part, it's my muse. You learn how to live with it. You exercise certain techniques and thought patterns, and there's so many things you can do to sort of live with mental disorders. If I'm going through a bout of depression, I can write some pretty intense stuff."

**Is there any specific music that helps you in those low moments?**

"My favourite group of all time is [UK electronica duo] The Orb. I listen to The Orb more than I do anything. It's music for mental health. They help anti-anxiety me. Everyone has that band that they put on or that song when you need to just come back to reality. If I'm not in a good place, I'll have The Orb on constantly. And that's my happy place."

**Was it hard to see Killswitch get so big after you left?**

"I was happy for those dudes and I knew they were getting big. But to be completely honest, I wanted nothing to do with that scene. I turned away from all that stuff and started





Jesse Leach with his KSE brothers,  
Mike D'Antonio, Joel Stroetzel,  
Justin Foley and Adam Dutkiewicz

## “FAITH IS A BEAUTIFUL THING. I HAVE FAITH TOO”

getting into stoner rock and doom, smoking weed and drinking. It was like, ‘Let me get as far away from this as I can.’ So when I did tap in and check them out, I’m like, ‘Holy shit, these guys are getting big!’”

**Did you ever go and see them with your replacement, Howard Jones?**

“I remember watching a clip of Killswitch playing a show, and I was like, ‘Dude, this is ridiculous. These guys are huge!’ So I put on a disguise – a big, old, hooded sweatshirt and a knit cap – and went to go see them play. I was happy for them. I didn’t feel jealous. I felt a little dumb, that it was kind of a dumb move to leave, but I knew that I had to do it and I was happy for those guys.”

**How did you get back into that scene?**

“Fast forward to a few years later, I’m in a band called Seemless, and I started touring again. The van that Killswitch had – a black Ford Econoline, the van that I suffered in, had mental breakdowns, anxiety – Seemless had bought from Killswitch Engage to tour with. So I went back into that same van with a different band, and I fell in love with touring. Seemless was fun, the pressure was off, I wasn’t taking myself so seriously. It was just a totally different environment. That’s when I wanted some success.”

**You rejoined Killswitch in 2012. Your set at that year’s Download festival felt like an important moment. Was it?**

“I knew this was an important moment for us as a band. Benji from Skindred was backstage. He came up to me and just gave me love, like, ‘Yo, this is dope. So good to see you.’

I love that dude, his energy is off the charts. Seeing him just charged me up: ‘Yes, I’m right where I belong.’ By the time we hit that stage, the sun just starting to crack through, I was so present to the moment, fighting back tears: ‘I can’t believe I’m here doing this again with these guys.’ I remember being so fulfilled. I get emotional just thinking about that moment. From that point on in my life, shit got really fucking cool.”

**Touring with Iron Maiden in 2019 must have been really fucking cool...**

“Oh yes! I mentioned the whole smashing of *The Number Of The Beast* – I actually got to tell that story to Bruce on that tour. He got such a kick out of it.”

**Given your upbringing, how would you identify yourself in terms of religion these days?**

“I don’t like labels. I don’t have to subscribe to what you say I should subscribe to, to feel like a spiritual being. I was raised Christian, but now I lean on Buddhism, I really like some of the philosophies from Krishna and Hinduism. Does it work? Are you treating people well? Are you living a life that’s filled with love and positivity? Good. Do it. If I were to give you a general ballpark statement, I’m a spiritual being. I absolutely do believe there’s something more to life than just us as humans.”

**So you’re still searching for something?**

“Always. I’m still thirsty for knowledge. I’m still hungry for the wisdom that has yet to be captured. I love knowledge, I love wisdom, I love hearing people’s stories. I love reading certain scriptures and philosophies. I add it to my brain and I continue with my wonderment and my hope. If I’m going to boil it all down to one statement: God is love. Love is the only thing that can save us as a species. Love is the only thing that is powerful enough to overcome all things.” 

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VUKOVI

“THIS IS AN  
EXORCISM!”



Featuring murderous alter egos and sex with Greek gods, new album *My God Has Got A Gun* sees Vukovi driving out their demons

WORDS: EMILY SWINGLE • PICTURES: CAMERON BRISBANE

In 2010, a bright-eyed 21-year-old Janine Shilstone went to London to try out for Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical adaptation of *The Wizard Of Oz*. With a passion for musical theatre and a yearning to escape into fantasy worlds, it seemed like becoming Dorothy was her destiny – but then, she realised her heart wasn't in it.

"I got down to the last 21 girls, but I hated it," she recalls of the auditions. "Once I was singing for Andy, and he said, 'I can tell you're not enjoying this. You want to be yourself – you're a rock star.'"

For the last 14 years, Janine's been the rock star frontwoman of Scottish pop-metallers Vukovi. Onstage, she shines, and is far more chaotic than a poised performer in a Webber production. Powered by Buckfast, she stagedives and goads the crowd into a frenzy with the rallying battlecry, "LET'S FUCKIN' GOOOOO!"

But scratch beneath the sass, and you'll find Janine's introspective side, evident on all three of Vukovi's albums. On 2017's self-titled debut and 2020's *Fall Better*, she explored toxic relationships and the pressures of social conformity, and expressed suicidal thoughts on the latter with the heartbreaking *I'm Sorry*. For 2022's *Nula*, she stepped things up a gear, addressing similar themes – and her OCD diagnosis – via a concept about the title's character being held captive in a sci-fi world. Its single, *I Exist*, saw a more hopeful Janine sing: "You've gotta stay, you'll be glad one day / And you know that better days will come to light."

Chatting to *Hammer* today from a studio, where she's working on a secret collab with a friend, anxiety is kicking in. Vukovi – Janine and lead guitarist Hamish Reilly – are about to release their fourth album, *My God Has Got A Gun*, their first for new label Sharptone.

"Talking about the record is a bit of a reality check," Janine admits. "It's a piece of myself, and it's terrifying to think it's going to be out in the world."

With *Nula*'s sci-fi concept abandoned, *My God Has Got A Gun* begins with the operatic declaration: "This is my life and my trauma." It's surprising, candid and dry – classic Janine.

"Opening on that, singing about 'my trauma' like it was holy and operatic, was a joke at first," Janine laughs. "We were in the kitchen discussing the record, and I just started singing it. But we recorded it because... well, it is exactly what the record is about."

Bursting with unnerving synths and frazzled screams, *My God...* feels like an uncontrollable descent into a tormented mind. Janine is lyrically volatile, flitting between gut-wrenching depression, bruised innocence and sensual lust. It's her unfiltered self.

"When we were writing the album, I had just started going through some quite intense therapy," she explains. "This record tracks my journey of purging all the shit that I've been carrying around for years. It's like an exorcism of the darkness inside of me."

You can see it in the album artwork, which Janine painted in the emotionally raw aftermath of a therapy session. The red and black piece oozes an unspeakable pain, almost like an abstract depiction of a bloody crime scene, and features a figure with dark hair.

"It's this entity that I kept going back to," she explains. "It felt like she was a part of me that was darker, but she could handle all the shit I try to separate from... I call her Sno."

Not only does Sno appear in the artwork, there's a track named after her. It's the most intense one, with Janine acknowledging her inner child, wishing for emotional disassociation, and wondering who could love her, as her feelings reach a crescendo.

"That song is the hardest song to listen to and perform," Janine admits. "It's about forgiving yourself and the things that have happened to you. It's the result of someone that's been traumatised and is in survival mode."

OCD, or obsessive compulsive disorder, is a mental health condition where a person experiences obsessive thoughts and feels driven to perform repetitive behaviours or mental acts to relieve their anxiety. While Janine was diagnosed in 2018, she had struggled with OCD traits since her early childhood. She refers to

Sno as an "alter ego," a side of her personality capable of combating her past traumas and spiteful thoughts.

"Sno was something I created as protection," she says. "Onstage, I'd say I'm more like Sno, because I've got no fear. She's not soft, she's not vulnerable, she'll fucking kill you to survive. It's a barrier I can hide behind."

Compartmentalisation and escapism have been some of Janine's most powerful coping methods over the years. From distracting herself with musical theatre and sci-fi movies in her youth, to finding solace in a story-based album like *Nula*, she's sought out ways to detach from pain. "It's always felt safer to lose myself in creative worlds," she admits.

"With my type of OCD, I often liken it to religion. It feels like there's something that follows me around and punishes me or rewards me for certain behaviours – which is similar to the idea of God always watching, punishing you for your sins. It has that same element of control."

Hence the album title: *My God Has Got A Gun*. Janine feels hounded by an omnipresent OCD presence holding a barrel flush against her temple, finger weighing on the trigger. *Fuc Kit Up* captures it best, with ominous electronics bolstered by rumbling riffs as Janine begs the tormentor in her mind to "put me out of my misery". The video for standalone single *Mercy Kill* was filmed in a church; Janine worships an unseen deity before being asphyxiated by something shadowy.

**U**ltimately, *My God...* sees Janine learning to love herself, a process she had started during the *Nula* cycle, and documented on *I Exist*. On that song, she declared she wanted to "find myself while I'm alive".

"With *Nula*, I had started to get some help," she admits. "Before then, there were points where I didn't see a future for myself. But *Nula* was me admitting, 'I can't live like this, and I want to be happy.'"

"It does make me quite sad listening back, because I realise how much I was tortured by it. During the first album, I was so lost. My

mental health was so bad, and the only thing that helped me was writing music and creating. I was too immature to think I needed any therapy."

*Cowboy* is perhaps Vukovi's most vulnerable song to date, Janine acknowledging she is worthy of love.

"Going to therapy made me realise that maybe I wasn't involving myself in 'healthy love'. *Cowboy* is about when you meet someone that is very good for you, and your mind tells you that you don't deserve it," she says, a flicker of sadness on her face. "It's battling against that gut feeling that you fucking deserve someone shite, that you need to self-sabotage and run."

The distress on *My God...* is balanced out with some absolute bangers – how would Janine be able to howl "LET'S FUCKIN' GOOOO!" if she was sobbing the entire time? Onstage, she loves to play the temptress, dancing in playful mesh bodysuits with a maniacal glint in her eye. While *Nula* track *Quench* was enough to have your mother gripping at her pearls, lead single *Gungho* is a fantasy about fucking and getting choked by Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep.

*Misty Ecstasy* offers even more explicit content and a ton of blissful energy. "I'll joke about having someone 'fuck me like a siren' – I enjoy the tongue-in-cheek sexuality," she grins. "It's fun, it's flirty and it's another way of allowing myself to feel desirable."

As Andrew Lloyd Webber recognised all those years ago, Janine is herself. She's a rock star. And while she's still on her journey of self-discovery, she hopes *My God...* will make people feel alive on theirs.

"We wanted this album to help people, but also be a bit of a celebration," she says. "It's ultimately an amalgamation of a human just trying to fucking get by and trying to exist."

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**MY GOD HAS GOT A GUN IS OUT ON JANUARY 24  
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Vukovi: demons beware



# VUKOVI MATHS

Janine reveals three albums that have influenced the Scottish duo



**LINKIN PARK**  
*HYBRID THEORY* (2000)  
“When *Hybrid Theory* came out, I was like, ‘Oh, this is dangerous! The heaviness, paired with the catchy vocals and brutally honest lyrics, made me want to be in a rock band.’”



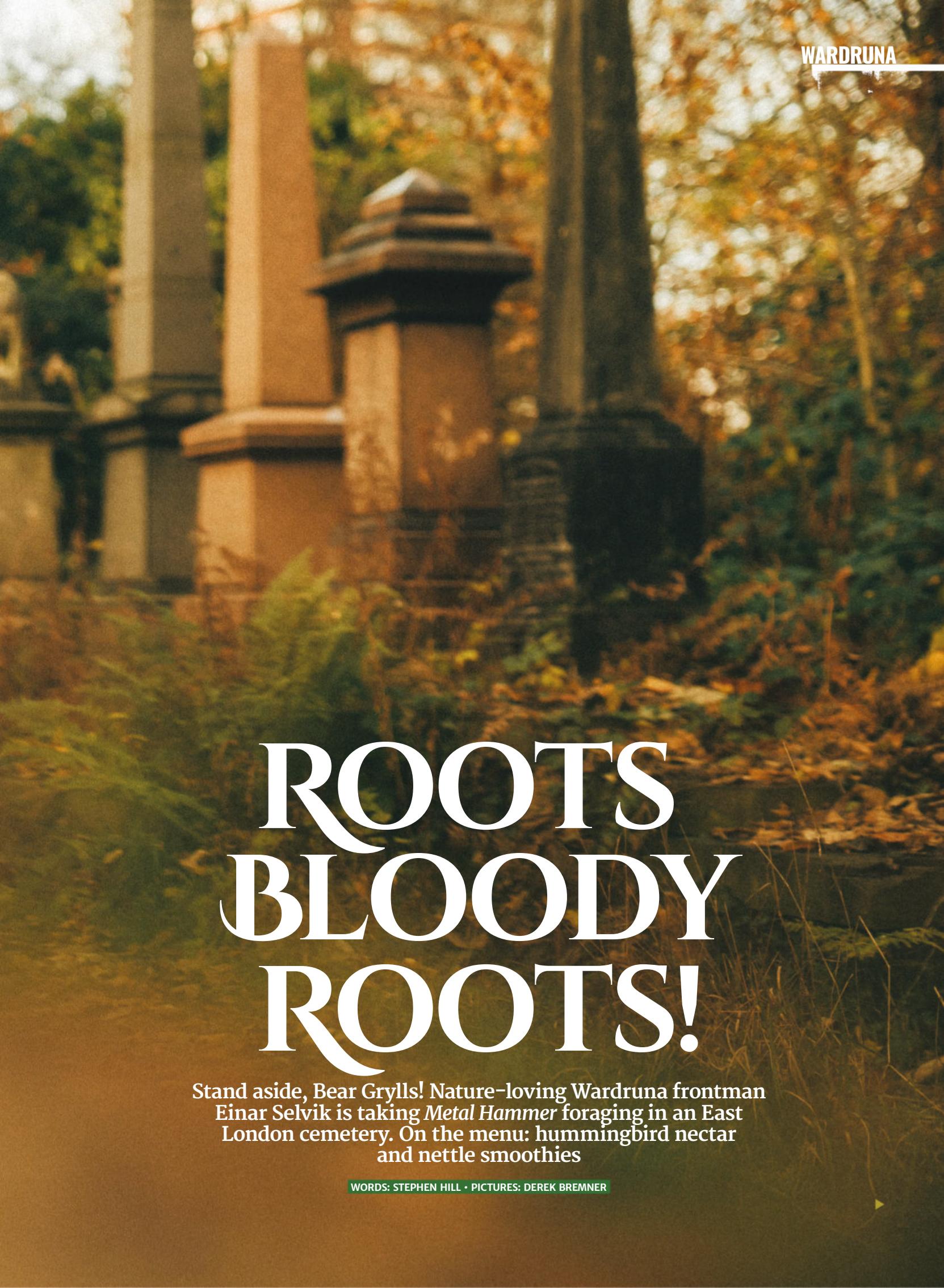
**BRING ME THE HORIZON**  
*THAT'S THE SPIRIT* (2015)  
“They’re trendsetters, and we both love them. This record was when they started to twist more towards the electronic side as well, which we definitely love to do.”



**ETHEL CAIN**  
*PREACHER'S DAUGHTER* (2022)  
“I grew up loving pop queens like Christina Aguilera, but Ethel Cain’s darker pop is so incredible. I drew inspiration from her in terms of the religious trauma and storytelling.”

WARDRUNA





# ROOTS BLOODY ROOTS!

Stand aside, Bear Grylls! Nature-loving Wardruna frontman Einar Selvik is taking *Metal Hammer* foraging in an East London cemetery. On the menu: hummingbird nectar and nettle smoothies

“C

ome on, man!” barks Wardruna’s Einar Selvik. “Get it down you!”

We’ve done some weird stuff in the name of journalism, from riding on Tommy Lee’s rollercoaster drumkit in

front of thousands of Mötley Crüe fans to scaling a blizzard-blasted Austrian mountain to meet Powerwolf, but we’ve never stood in an East London cemetery on a freezing winter morning, with a blond-haired, bearded Viking gazing intensely at us, about to pop a raw stinging nettle we’ve just pulled up from the base of a gravestone into our mouth.

“Come on, get it down you,” repeats Einar, as the rolled-up leaf hovers near our mouth. A grin spreads across his face, almost like he’s taking some pleasure in our discomfort.

And so, literally grasping the nettle, we pop it in. Down the hatch it goes. Well, actually it doesn’t. It gets stuck in our throat halfway down, leading to a fair bit of spluttering and dry heaving.

“How is it?” Einar enquires.

In all honesty mate, we’ve had better.

**T**ower Hamlets Cemetery Park in Mile End, East London, was established as a graveyard in 1841 and is regarded as one of the ‘Magnificent Seven’, the nickname given to seven of the capital’s biggest and most historic cemeteries. It closed for burials in 1966, and today is run as a local nature reserve.

It’s here, among the gravestones and leaves, that we’ve met Einar for a foraging expedition. As a man whose music and life are deeply entwined with the natural world, Einar isn’t a complete stranger to the concept of foraging.

“I have friends who do this sort of thing all the time,” he says. “Certain things in certain seasons are good to gather from the forest. I’m a novice, but I appreciate people creating awareness about how to use nature, and be part of nature, rather than just buying your groceries in the store.”

We’ve been joined by Ken, one of the park’s managers and a foliage expert. Ken leads around 40 foraging tours every year, ranging from the beginners’ tour we’ll be doing today to one that ends with him making a pizza using whatever he finds growing among the graves, cooking it over an open fire.

Any doubts about the riskiness of eating plants pulled straight from the ground are eased when Ken informs us he once won an episode of *Come Dine With Me* using a menu of foraged food. Einar looks impressed.

“People like this, they actually make the world a better place just by having people touch plants,” he says, referring to Ken. “Touch soil, touch the ground, be around negative ions. It does something to your state of mind. It calms you.”

Einar formed Wardruna in 2003 while he was still a member of Norwegian black metal band Gorgoroth, with the intention of creating music steeped in and inspired by his homeland’s cultural traditions.

Their journey has been like few others. They’ve gone from playing their first ever gig in front of a 1,300-year-old Viking ship in Oslo to an upcoming date headlining the Royal Albert Hall in London in March (something Einar says is both a surprise and an honour). Given they’re a band that largely eschews modernity, favouring dark, atmospheric folk played on traditional instruments, their popularity is surprising.

The success of artists such as Heilung – who also draw on traditional instrumentation, folk and history – can be linked to doors opened by Wardruna. Einar believes the bands have become popular because of people’s hunger to reconnect with nature, in a modern world that has lost touch with its roots.



Einar gets stuck in



“Hmmm... I’m getting notes of blackberry... nutmeg... and decades-old corpse”

“I think it’s only natural, because that’s what you see in everything in society,” he tells us. “If the pendulum swings too far to one side, it’s gonna start swinging back. You will get a counterculture movement against it.”

Which brings us back to why we’re here today. There has been a surge in interest in foraging over the last decade. Ken puts this down to it being “another way people can connect to nature. Being in parks is good for our wellbeing.”

So here we are, wrapped up warm to keep out the winter cold, with a member of one of metal’s most unique bands, ready to seek out some of the most delicious plants nature has to offer, straight from the soil. So what do we do then, Ken?

“Firstly, just pick some of the plants growing around the gate behind you and have a taste,” he replies.

Einar wastes no time in grabbing a handful and gobbling away on them like a goat that has skipped breakfast.

“I’m getting watermelon,” he says.

“Yes, very good!” exclaims Ken.

Off we go to the next area, where Ken instructs us to try a piece of the red valerian, which is growing from a nearby grave, which sounds pretty metal. Ken warns us that it is



"very bitter", but stick it in a soup or use it as garnish for a salad and it makes a great substitute for spinach or rocket. He's not wrong.

Einar agrees. His own foraging experiences usually only amount to the odd berry or herb that he finds on his walks, though nature in the broader sense is central to Wardruna's philosophy.

"I know a lot of people think it's about Vikings and shit, but it never was," he says. "The music itself has a very animistic place of origin. It is about nature itself, or our relationship to it."

Nature feeds into Wardruna's new album, *Birna*. Following the release of 2021's *Kvitravn*, Einar spent two years writing poetry in an attempt to figure out a direction and theme for a follow-up. Eventually, he came to the realisation that he was "sick and tired of human fetishisation and having to put humans at the centre of everything", and decided that Wardruna's next album should tell the story of a bear ('*Birna*' is the Old Norse for a female bear, or 'she-bear').

"I use the bear, or the she-bear more specifically, as a way of telling a story about the cyclic movements of nature," he begins. "It doesn't need all of these human experiences to tell the story. Wherever there are bears, there are so many traditions, folklore, star signs."

Einar believes that *Birna* conveys its story in a "slightly less esoteric way, speaking more directly", compared to previous Wardruna albums. Still, there are layers to the record, and the bear is used symbolically to illustrate broader points.

"What is it with the bear that makes it so prominent in people's lives, apart from it being a big, beautiful animal?" he muses. "Of course, it mirrors the movement we see in nature. The seasons, the life, death and rebirth of Mother



## "TOUCH SOIL, TOUCH THE GROUND... IT CALMS YOU"

Nature, that's what we see with the bear: hibernation. That's what we see with the salmon

swimming upstream in the river to the place they were born to spawn and die. That's beautiful poetry. That is basically what I wanted to paint the picture of. These movements that we see and how they connect."

Hearing Einar talk about the beauty and wonder of the natural world, while scrambling around in the dirt and pulling up greenery from graves, has given us a bit of courage to scoff down pretty much anything Ken points at.

He tells us to chomp on some pansies and primroses (cheaper than spending a fortune on sugared ones from Waitrose). Then he gets us to shake some hummingbird nectar from a bush and lick it off our hands. We pull up something called the 'root of honesty' and chew on its aniseedy base. We pick some seeds from a weed and discover a taste like nutmeg. We add the best of it to our basket, which is filling up quite quickly, to be used for our smoothie later.

Unfortunately, under the increasing delusion that we're the next Bear Grylls, we get a little too cocky. We stuff a mouthful of a plant delightfully named lady's smock into our greedy faces before Ken can warn us that it's a great substitute for wasabi. Eyes water, throat burns, it feels like ►



our nasal hair is singeing off. Einar looks at us like the dozy tourist we are.

"The bear is seen as the teacher," he says. "Native Americans followed the bear and copied what they ate."

That's all well and good, but there aren't too many bears in London's East End.

**A**fter an hour, we've picked up enough foliage, berries, seeds and leaves to create our smoothie, so we settle in the middle of the park to create it. Ken, a man who has spent his entire time with us extolling the virtue of all things organic, pulls out a bottle of apple juice and a battery-powered blender to get everything going.

He pours in the juice, alongside our assorted foraged ingredients, before setting us to work, *Hammer* squeezing a lemon and Einar drizzling some syrup (shop-bought, FFS) into the mix. The Wardruna man is tasked with churning the whole thing up, making sure he keeps his impressive beard out of the way of the blender.

Once it's ready, Ken pours each of us a cup of the rather luminous green liquid. Can we forage? The moment of truth has arrived.

"SKÅL!" barks Einar, before putting the cup to his lips.

We join him, swigging down a hearty gulp of the juice, and, if we say so ourselves, it's very nice. A fruity, thick beverage with a tangy and rich aftertaste.

"It is nice actually, you've done very well," he nods – high praise from a bloke who once won *Come Dine With Me*. Einar clearly agrees, going in for a second cup after polishing off the first one in record time.

"Nature creates culture," he says, swallowing another mouthful. "When you go into older parts of our culture, you

see that it's sprung out of nature. That is why I believe a lot of these things still speak to us, why they are still relevant, why many of these traditions don't belong in a museum. It resonates there because it's relevant still, because it's born out of the very ground we still walk on."

Smoothies finished, we head back through the park, taking in the wildlife as we stroll. Einar tells us how he walks his dog for miles every day, which is when the majority of his ideas and inspirations for the art he makes come to him.

"It is medicine and it's simple maths," he says. "Just seeing the horizon, seeing and hearing birds – what it does to you, how it calms you."

That calmness is evident when you meet Einar in person. It's rare for a musician to be as present as he is. Rather than worrying about success or grand plans, he seems accepting of whatever the future may hold.

"Plans for the future?" he says with a snort, as we walk back to civilisation. "It's not important. It doesn't have to be this idea that everything has to grow, that everything needs to become bigger than what it is. For me, I'm so grateful for these opportunities. I think that's the premise for growth – to be happy where you are and grateful where you are. It's not something I or any of the other people involved take for granted, the fact that it speaks to people on a different level, not only through their ears. I enjoy being able to swipe the phones out of people's hands, metaphorically speaking."

Living in the moment, enjoying the natural world and creating art out of it? We'll drink a foraged smoothie to that. 

---

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Einar Selvik: nature boy

**“MANY TRADITIONS RESONATE BECAUSE THEY’RE STILL RELEVANT”**

## BEAR NECESSITIES

Famous bears ranked in order of scariness, in honour of Wardruna's *Birna*



**WINNIE-THE-POOH**  
Beloved kids' character. Admittedly has a weird tendency to wear a shirt but no pants in public, but zero threat to human life.



**PADDINGTON BEAR**  
A bit like Winnie-the-Pooh with a serious marmalade sarnie addiction. Hard Stare is not to be fucked with.



**BEARTOOOTH**  
Acclaimed US metalcore outfit led by the marvellous Caleb Shomo. Marginally harder than Paddington, but still not much use in a fight.



**BEAR GRYLLS**  
Posh survivalist Bear can survive in the wild for months on raw acorns and squirrel's tears. Could probably take down a real bear with a plastic spork.



**IOREK BYRNISON**  
Ursine King Of Svalbard in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series. Hard bastard, but he does love a spot of hot air ballooning.



**GRIZZLY BEAR**  
Forty-odd stone of teeth, claws and bad attitude. If you spot one, run. Unless you're Bear Grylls with a spork, in which case you'll be fine.



**COCAINE BEAR**  
The Mötley Crüe of the animal world, if Mötley Crüe were four angry mama bears on Olympic quantities of nose-ningle.



**NORSE BERSERKERS**  
Fabled Viking warriors who could channel the spirit of the bear and kill everybody. Johan Hegg's bedroom wall is covered in posters of 'em.

FIT FOR AN AUTOPSY

# SEEING RED

Some bands are angry. Fit For An Autopsy are *really* angry.

As a deathcore band writing about real-world horrors,  
they can't bring themselves to look away – no matter what

WORDS: MERLIN ALDERSLADE • PICTURES: BEN GIBSON



FIT FOR AN AUTOPSY





it For An Autopsy are an angry band. They sound angry, their unique ‘post-deathcore’ a savage outcry about the state of planet Earth. While some of their peers write posturing anthems driven by aimless rage, everyday heartbreak or juvenile gore and grisliness, FFAA dig into real-world trauma – like Gojira and Cattle

Decapitation before them, they’re making extreme music with a purpose, tackling political injustice, the environment and capitalistic corruption.

They also look angry. Promotional photos show six big, glowering, tattooed dudes staring down the camera, and live shows reveal a frontman who looks like a pissed-off Uruk-Hai as he screams and bellows his guts out. So yeah, Fit For An Autopsy are angry. They’re furious, in fact. Scratch that: they’re positively seething. They’re... they’re... all bopping around this freezing-cold warehouse singing along to Haddaway’s 90s house banger, *What Is Love*. Wait, hold on...

“I mean, my first ever concert was Backstreet Boys,” grins frontman Joe Badolato, quickly clarifying: “Into The Millennium tour!”

OK, so maybe Fit For An Autopsy aren’t always angry. They mostly save that for the studio, where they can unleash their frustrations at the world in full, nailing their political colours to the mast, unbothered by the backlash that may follow.

In 2017 they released *Black Mammoth*, a song written in solidarity with those who objected to the construction of the final section of the Dakota Access Pipeline, which would carry oil from North Dakota to Illinois via an area just north of Standing Rock, a Sioux Native American reservation. Protesters feared the project would destroy sacred burial sites and contaminate drinking water. The video for the single showed footage of previous devastation caused by oil spills, alongside protesters, police and historical artwork depicting themes of colonialism.

Many supported the band, but there was pushback from some fans on social media.

“I will not buy this album if a single dime goes to would-be protester thugs,” commented one. “So lame and political, you guys and Suicide Singalong should have a tour sponsored by Tampax and L’Oreal,” said another.

On social posts, they’ve shown support for initiatives such as the Black Lives Matter movement and International Women’s Day. When *Hammer* asks guitarist Will Putney where the band’s interest in politics stems from, he attributes it to his and guitarist Pat Sheridan’s time spent in the New Jersey hardcore scene, where bands would rage against societal injustice – “the general nature of that culture was always more active in being aware of social issues,” he explains. It’s something that’s run through Fit For An Autopsy’s music ever since.

“If you know the band, you know the kind of people we are, you know what we stand for,” says Pat, as five musicians and one journalist attempt to cram into a tiny kitchen space set up next to the spacious room where our photoshoot is taking place. “We’ve always caught a little bit of heat when we come out ‘ultra-political’, or if we take a stance on something, but we’re OK with that. It’s OK to disagree with

us, as long as you’re not being violent or aggressive with us. We’ll talk to anybody about anything. We’ll prove to you what kind of people we are.”

Pat, a founding member of Fit For An Autopsy, is an engaging interviewee. Dressed in a thick North Face jacket and a black End cap that covers most of his head tattoos, he’s an intense but thoughtful fella. You soon sense he doesn’t suffer fools gladly; a quick aside on how he deals with people who object to his progressive ideological stances confirms this.

“Maybe you don’t understand me, let’s have a talk,” he explains. “There’s not enough of that, so we can do that. But we also won’t be met with the opposite of that. And if you meet us with the opposite of that, you’ll find out quickly. We will shut you down. We’ll fight. You bring a flamethrower, I’m bringing a fucking truck full of gasoline. You know what I mean? There’s no in-between.”

**I**t’s this zero-compromise mentality that has helped Fit For An Autopsy rise through metal’s ranks. Formed in 2007 as a side-project for musicians in that New Jersey scene, their line-up has been fluid at best: three singers, various touring members, no full-time bassist until 2019. The two constants? Pat and Will, the latter serving as an Oz-like figure behind the scenes of the band since its formation. He writes a hefty chunk of their music while sitting out touring duties to concentrate on his ‘main gig’ as one of the most in-demand producers in modern metal, working with the likes of Body Count, Thy Art Is Murder, Northlane and Knocked Loose (see ‘Where There’s A Will’, page 70).

Since finally establishing a long-term line-up – Pat, Will, Joe, drummer Josean Orta (who joined in 2012), guitarist Tim Howley (2013) and bassist Peter ‘Blue’ Spinazola (touring musician from 2017, full-timer from 2019... keeping up?) – the band have evolved drastically. From Gojira-esque pick-scratches, to At The Gates-style melodeath hooks, to more intense vocal harmonies and bursts of thrash, doom and tech metal, their last two albums in particular have contained so many ideas and influences that they haven’t so much outgrown deathcore as lapped it five times over.

“We’ve emerged out of any kind of genre-specific ‘thing,’” Pat observes. “Not that I mind being called a ‘deathcore’ band. I don’t care what you call me, as long as you’re calling!”

Oh *What The Future Holds*, released in 2022, snuck inside the Top 25 of the Billboard 200 – an insane achievement for a band this heavy. 2024’s *The Nothing That Is* was another career high-water mark, rapturously received by fans and critics alike. As *Hammer* speaks to the band, they’re about to headline the 1,500-capacity Birmingham Institute – a venue they played as main support only a year prior, and where they played fourth from top just three years ago.

“The crazy part is, it feels like I blinked and we got here,” says Pat. “Then I start thinking about all the things that have happened in the interim. It’s been a fucking long time! But I wouldn’t change it. We all feel like we’ve earned something, and we respect it differently than a band that just comes in and immediately blows up.”

While FFAA have been a relatively slow and steady success story, it was kicked into... well, let’s call it *third gear* by the arrival of Joe in 2015, following the departure of original vocalist Nate Johnson and then his brief replacement, Greg Wilburn. Joe takes up most of the door frame he’s leaning against as he chats to *Hammer* – with his long hair and black longsleeve, he would cut an intimidating figure if it weren’t for the fact that he’s all smiles. The only time he breaks his relaxed demeanour is when he speaks of his vow to make it in the metal scene. Joe’s laidback warmth contrasts with Pat’s hyper-focused intensity, but if there’s ►

Fit For An Autopsy: angry as hell...  
unless Haddaway is playing



Beware, idiots! Pat Sheridan  
does not suffer fools gladly



## “YOU BRING A FLAMETHROWER, I’M BRINGING A TRUCK FULL OF GASOLINE”

PAT SHERIDAN



one thing they share, it's that determination to knuckle down and get shit done.

“I was in four local bands at the time, just trying to make it work,” Joe recalls of the moment he was asked to join FFAA. “I was a barber; I'd just been cutting hair and playing music over and over.”

While cutting the hair of one of his bands' bassists, Joe received the phone call that'd change his life, as Will Putney invited him to demo some material for Fit For An Autopsy. Joe smashed it, went for dinner with Pat and Will in New Jersey, and the rest is history.

“They were like, ‘We're not making a lot of money at all, so we hope that you're not trying to make some money’” chuckles Joe, who now owns a barber shop in Arizona. “I was like, ‘Honestly, I've been saving all my money so I can do this.’ I was the only one out of my entire friend group that didn't stop doing music, because I just knew that it was what I wanted. And I'm very stubborn; if I really want something, I'm gonna push as hard as I can, even if I'm homeless, broke, doing whatever I have to do to make it work.”

**F**it The Nothing That Is, Fit For An Autopsy released some of their most urgent, affecting and provocative work, perhaps best exemplified by the track *Red Horizon*. Written in response to the conflict in Gaza, it includes some bone-chilling lyrics (*The bodies burned so bright that God closed his eyes*), as well as lines that were interpreted by some fans as antisemitic (*Beasts of Zion, Curse your name... Every pocket lined with gold has cost a soul in other places*). It also ends with the highly contentious phrase *'From the river to the sea'* – a line claimed by pro-Palestine campaigners as a slogan for peace, but criticised by many Jewish organisations as an antisemitic call for the dismantling of Israel.

“You're allowed to call someone who lives in a certain place a bad person without saying everyone who's there is bad,” says Will defiantly, when Hammer asks him about those lyrics. “My family is Jewish,” he adds. “Saying I'm antisemitic is crazy... we're calling out a shitty issue.”

The song's striking video is a little broader in its themes. It features two girls living in parallel – one enjoying a comfortable life with her family, the other surviving in the middle of a war zone. Its message was made all the more pertinent by the fact the girl in the war zone was played by an actress named Milana Nashkova, who had escaped from Ukraine in the midst of the Russian-Ukraine War.

“We were looking for people to be in the video, and their family came up,” reveals Pat. “So we have this person who is a refugee from a war-torn country who wants to play the part of somebody who is going through that very exact thing.”

“Singing the song is always powerful, but watching it all come to life through a video, and then knowing her story, it hits you really differently,” says Joe. “It hit me pretty hard. I was watching it the first time, I was getting a little choked. Like, that was *real*.”

“That's why we do it,” adds Pat. “It's easy to say you have an opinion on something you've never really experienced. What would you do if these things happened to you? What would you do if your family lost everything because of decisions of a government or corporations?”



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## FIT FOR AN AUTOPSY

Fit For An Autopsy (left to right): Pat Sheridan, Tim Howley, Joe Badolato, Peter 'Blue' Spinazola, Josean Orta



### "I'LL LEAVE THIS CAREER WITH MY HEAD HELD HIGH"

JOE BADOLATO

And how would you get through that? Those are the ideas that push us a lot."

Seventeen years and seven albums in, Fit For An Autopsy's anger feels more vital than ever. But how far can a band like theirs go? Considering the ferocious music they make, they've already smashed all realistic expectations. What's next?

"We just move forward," responds Pat, matter-of-fact as ever. "When the wheels fall off, we pick this up and put it on our backs and carry it up the mountain."

Joe, it seems, has more crystallised ambitions in mind.

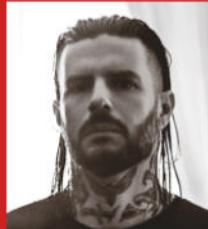
"We definitely have dreams of wanting to do certain things," he says. "We saw Sleep Token the other day in Glasgow on our day off. 14,000, sold out. It just makes me hungry, seeing stuff like that. I will work as hard as I have to to get there, and if I don't get there, it's fine. At the end of this career, I'll still leave, my head held high, knowing that I did so much really cool shit."

Fit For An Autopsy in arenas? It might sound unlikely, but so does an extreme metal band dropping chart albums and singing along to Haddaway...

**THE NOTHING THAT IS IS OUT NOW VIA NUCLEAR BLAST. THE BAND WILL PLAY DOWNLOAD IN JUNE**

### WHERE THERE'S A WALL...

As well as being Fit For An Autopsy's co-founder and key songwriter, Will Putney has produced albums for the likes of Body Count and Knocked Loose



#### IS IT TRUE YOU WERE ORIGINALLY LOOKING TO BECOME A BIOMEDICAL ENGINEER?

"Totally! Music was always more of a hobby than it was a career. But I got hooked up with Machine, the record producer [Lamb Of God, Clutch], took classes, and then after a few months of interning with him, I figured this was my calling."

#### WHAT WAS SO APPEALING ABOUT MUSIC PRODUCTION TO YOU?

"The creative side of it. I was like, 'Oh, shit, I get to be in everybody's band!' I grew up worshipping stuff like Nine Inch Nails and was a huge sound design guy, so being able to see behind the curtain was really awesome for me."

#### HOW DID FIT FOR AN AUTOPSY COME TOGETHER?

"Me and Pat started Fit with friends from New Jersey. We were kind of a hardcore band, but we switched gears, and it was fun to figure out our lane. What's cool about Fit is because we were fans of all these genres, we bring a lot of influences into the band."

#### HOW EASY HAS IT BEEN NAVIGATING THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN YOU AND PAT, GIVEN THAT YOU'RE NOT ON THE ROAD WITH THE BAND?

"It's really easy now. Obviously, it took a little while to figure out, but we're happy in our roles. We've been friends for so long, and we trust each other."

#### ICE-T REFERRED TO YOU AS THE DR. DRE OF METAL...

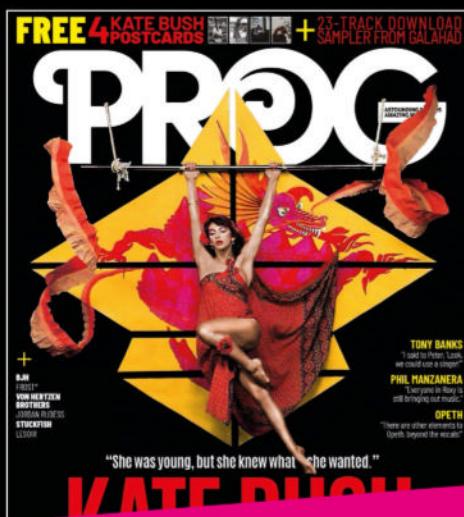
"That pops up every once in a while! I mean, it's awesome. I love Ice, he's a fucking sweet dude, and we've worked together for years. Dr. Dre was definitely a producer that I really respected, and I think Ice looks at him as the pinnacle of hip hop production. So if he refers to me in that light too, it's very flattering."

For the stories behind the best albums and  
the bands that produced them...

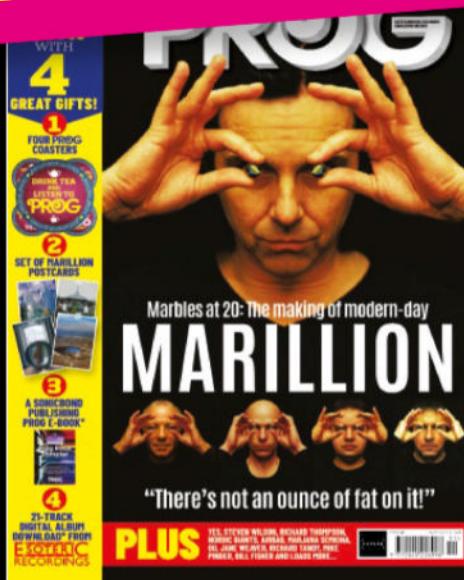
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SLEEPLESS

# LA DOLCE VITA

No band has done more than Lacuna Coil to put Italian metal on the map over the last 30 years. Along the way there have been disastrous tours, break-ups and the attention of the FBI

WORDS: PAUL TRAVERS • PICTURES: CUNENE

LACUNA COIL





hen Cristina Scabbia and Andrea Ferro first met in a metal dive called The Midnight, in their home city of Milan in the early 1990s, the prospect of forging a musical partnership that would take them all around the world for the next three decades was not even a fantasy.

"Italy doesn't really have the history of rock'n'roll or metal roots or culture," says Cristina more than 30 years on. "When we were sending our details to labels using a fax machine, we couldn't even imagine getting signed."

Back then, no Italian rock band had broken out on a global scale, but Lacuna Coil would change that, becoming international stars and Italy's biggest-ever metal export in the process. Today their ongoing journey has brought them to Nottingham's Rock City, where they're playing later this evening.

They've already been to look at the venue's Lemmy memorial containing some of the late Motörhead frontman's ashes, and the two co-vocalists are huddled against the English chill. Cristina is wrapped in a none-more-black shawl and chain-eats throat lozenges to protect her voice. Andrea leaves his overcoat on, but the pair are all smiles as they look back at their long journey to this point.

The roots of Lacuna Coil go back to 1993. Andrea was playing bass and singing in a band named Sleep Of Right with bassist Marco Coti Zelati, who would go on to become Lacuna's bassist and chief composer. Cristina was dating Marco and would hang out with the band at rehearsals. She had sung before, without using her name or image, for DJ friends who were producing records.

"We asked her to try something with us and we loved the result," Andrea recalls.

Initially they were just thinking about using Cristina for backing vocals, but the dual approach worked so well that they decided to make it a feature of the band.

"There were female vocalists of course, but we were leaning towards the doomy, gothic death metal mix and it sounded very different in that context," he adds.

They took advantage of a local government offer giving young bands the opportunity to record for half-price at night, working from midnight until 7am. By day they plotted their rise from a makeshift band HQ located at the gothic clothing and shoe store Cristina was working in at the time. Century Media Records took a punt on the band – by this time renamed Lacuna Coil, meaning 'empty spiral' – and they headed out on their first ever tour, supporting Portuguese goth-metal mainstays Moonspell. It was an unmitigated disaster.

"Our guitarist was called for mandatory military service, and the friend we got in as a substitute got really sick with diarrhoea. He was getting really skinny and anxious and started freaking out," Andrea recalls.

The hapless six-stringer dropped out, along with their drummer, but the core trio of Cristina, Andrea and Marco were determined to make the most of the opportunity. They grimly held on and finished the tour with the help of

Moonspell's drum tech and a guitar tech pretending to play the guitar parts, which were actually on tape.

A post-tour shake-up saw them jettison the dead wood and recruit long-term replacements with the same level of commitment. The band continued to plug away with steely determination, releasing their first two albums and gradually building a name for themselves on the European circuit.

It was their third album, 2002's *Comalies*, that would eventually provide their international breakthrough. Refining their developing sound into a fully realised package, it combined dark gothic atmosphere and melancholy themes with shimmering hooks and an aggressive metal crunch. The switches and interplay between Cristina's crystalline vocals and Andrea's more belligerent bark added to the shifting dynamics and sense of light and shade. It was a fantastic album, but, as Cristina points out, you also need a slice of luck.

**T**hat luck came when Ozzy and Sharon Osbourne's son, Jack, brought Lacuna Coil to the attention of his parents, who promptly signed them up for the 2004 Ozzfest. The Italians quickly found themselves part of the chaos of this travelling festival.

"You only had 20 minutes to prove yourself and, apart from the headliners, the bands would rotate, so you might be playing at 9.30 in the morning or the best slot of the afternoon," Cristina recalls. "Every day was different and all the bands would hang out and party. I was in catering one time and someone said, 'Ozzy and Sharon would like to say hi.' I was a little bit starstruck, but they signed this album for me that had all of the bands from the tour on it."

Their appearance on the Ozzfest tour, combined with radio and MTV picking up on the single *Heaven's A Lie*, meant the band's US profile skyrocketed, and their burgeoning success had a knock-on effect back in Europe. They soon became Century Media's

## "I HAD AN FBI AGENT IN EVERY TOWN CHECKING ON ME"

Cristina Scabbia

biggest-selling act at the time, and the success of *Comalies* kicked off a whirlwind period for the band. They toured near-constantly and 2006's follow-up album, *Karmacode*, continued the success, adding a nu metal bite that alienated some existing fans but won them many more. The constant grind of those years did have some casualties, however, one of which was Cristina's romantic relationship with Marco.

"When you tour together for such a long time, you get to the point that you really become like a brother and sister," she says, when asked if dealing with the split caused any friction within the band. "And I really do love him as a brother. I'd kill for him! Maybe we had a few months of assessing things, but I don't think we brought our problems into the band."

Cristina would later start a relationship with Slipknot guitarist Jim Root. In metal terms it was an A-list celebrity match-up, but the couple kept things low key.

"We were together for more than 13 years, but it's our stuff," she says. "There's a line you shouldn't cross, not only for respect of the other person, but also the fact that people don't need to know. I think that many celebrity couples give

There weren't many women in metal when Cristina Scabbia co-founded Lacuna Coil



away so much and then when something happens they're asking for privacy. If you want privacy, you carve it for yourself from the very beginning. It's something that we lived and it will stay there," she adds, politely but firmly.

One thing that did cause a little friction within Lacuna Coil was the fact that much of the attention the band received focused on Cristina.

"Not so much for me, but the guys in the band felt a little underappreciated," Andrea nods.

"We had a talk about it, because the situation was getting out of hand," Cristina continues. "We had pictures taken in which I was visible and they were in the very back. We didn't want to be 'Cristina and her band'. We were and have always been just a band."

The singer does admit to enjoying the attention and photoshoots that came her way, however.

"In the beginning I did feel a little bit full of myself. It went to my head for a while, because it was so peculiar and unexpected. I got over it pretty quickly, but being on the cover of a magazine is still pretty awesome."

There was also the glut of 'Hottest Chicks In Metal'-themed magazine issues that appeared in the 2000s and early 2010s, many of which featured Cristina...

"I don't see the negativity at all," she counters. I know a lot of people are against this because they see it as sexism, but I thought it was just a way to say 'beautiful'. I didn't see it as something that objectified me."

Not all of the trappings of fame were quite so welcome. Some fans were simply over-intense, like the guy who presented Cristina with his wedding ring.

"That was to tell me he had ended a toxic relationship and to thank me for somehow saving him from something bad with my voice," she says. "That was peculiar, but I did have actual stalkers that were potentially dangerous and would follow me around. I remember them sending me weird pictures of me covered in blood or sending me pictures of a foetus. I reported it, and for one complete tour I had an FBI agent in every town checking on me. It was not only disturbing, it was also boring for me because I had to be confined on a tour bus every day."

Cristina says she was never a big drinker, but for the rest of the band, a bit of partying often served as a pressure valve.

"There was some alcohol abuse here and there," nods Andrea. "That was getting kind of heavy, because when you're on the road for three months, you're drinking for those three months. None of us was really an alcoholic and when you're young it's easier, but you do start to pay the price."

"The worst I've seen them?" ponders Cristina. "We were out with Rob Zombie and had a party on our bus. Bullet For My Valentine were there and they were big partiers. We were sponsored by Jägermeister back then, and I saw six bottles go in 10 minutes. Even Bullet just

# "THERE WAS BLOOD ON THE WALLS OF THE TOUR BUS"

**CRISTINA SCABBIA**

left because there was moshing; there was blood on the on the walls of the tour bus the day after. It was insane, but I was sober because I wanted to film it all. I have some tapes, but those will die with me!"

Subsequent years would see a number of line-up changes, but that core trio of Cristina, Andrea and Marco has held firm. After three decades together, Cristina describes her bandmates as her second family.

"We can have discussions, party together, hate each other for a few minutes and love each other to pieces," she says. "It's a very stable relationship at the moment and we have the same goals and drives. We still have that itch of competition, but we're in competition with ourselves to keep doing better. It's so fresh that for us it's like we started a couple of years ago."

That continued drive now sees the band returning with their 10th studio album, *Sleepless Empire*. It's not a concept album, but, like several of their works, it does have an overarching theme.

"We're the last generation to have lived through an entirely analogue world into a digital one, and we can testify to the change," Andrea explains.

"...And we kind of feel that we are living in a time in which it feels weird to take a break. You have to be present all the time or you'll just disappear," Cristina continues. "It can be destructive and it's a reflection on these things; how they impact our lives and how we can connect and disconnect from it all."

The album is darkly cinematic, leaning towards the heavier end of Lacuna Coil's spectrum. It features guest appearances from Ash Costello of New Years Day (on *In The Mean Time*) and Lamb Of God's Randy Blythe (on *Hosting The Shadow*).

"Ash has such a specific voice. I wrote the part specially for her and she did a phenomenal job," says Cristina. "Randy we've known for years. When he comes to Milano we go out for dinner, or just for a walk. He's part of the extended family."

Lacuna Coil's extended family of fans, friends and musical peers now reaches right around the world, but at heart they're still the little band from Milan made good.

"We were the first ones from our country to do a lot of things in metal," says Andrea. "It's something we never thought was possible when we started, but it makes us proud and it makes us happy."

"I was one of the very few females who started in the metal business at that time," Cristina adds. "I hope I'm going to be doing it for a long time, but if I can pass the flame and inspire others to do their own thing with it, I couldn't ask for much more." 

## "DEPECHE MODE LOVED IT!"

Five key Lacuna Coil songs in their own words



### SHALLOW END (DEMO, 1996)

**Cristina Scabbia:** "It was one of the songs that got us attention when we were a young band looking for a deal. We recorded two songs in a studio in Milano at night. We physically sent the cassette to labels, hoping they would notice us. Someone got the tape and gave us a chance."



### HEAVEN'S A LIE (COMALIES, 2002)

**Cristina:** "When we wrote it, we didn't imagine it would be such a big success. But when we went to the US [on the 2004 Ozzfest], it started to be played by a lot of radio stations."

**Andrea Ferrero:** "Some of the stations were owned by religious groups and the DJs had to censor the title to hide it from the owners. They would announce it as 'A Lie'. People would say to us, 'We love your song, A Lie.' We'd say, 'What song is that?'"



### OUR TRUTH (KARMA CODE, 2006)

**Andrea:** "It was the download era and we put out a file of white noise called 'Lacuna Coil - Our Truth' on the internet before the release as a test, just to see how many people would download it. We had more than three million in week. That was a sign of change - we knew there was a lot of attention around the band."



### ENJOY THE SILENCE (KARMA CODE, 2006)

**Cristina:** "It started with me because I love Depeche Mode. Marco, who writes the majority of the music, wasn't really agreeing: 'I don't know if it's a good idea.' But then he turned it in a way where it almost became one of our songs. It turned out so good that the actual band [Depeche Mode] liked it! They gave us permission to do the video for it."



### BLOOD, TEARS, DUST (DELIRIUM, 2016)

**Cristina:** "It's a song that can symbolise the change that was happening back then in the band - new members, new inputs, a new way of creating music."

**Andrea:** "We became more aware that we can just follow our guts. We took a risk and tried to shake things up a bit. And as always, people recognise when you do something that you mean, that you're real about."

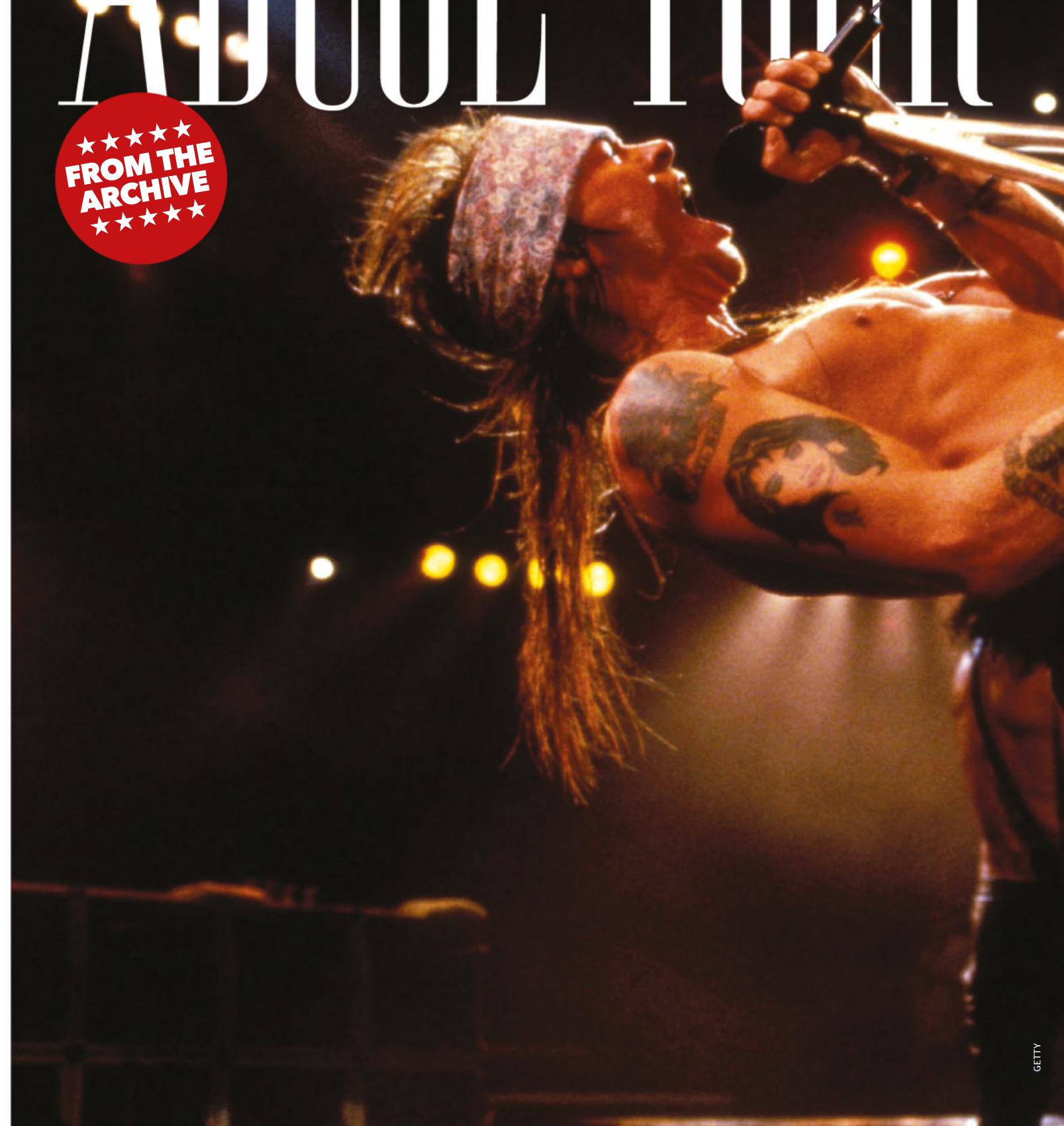
Lacuna Coil (left to right): Marco Coti Zelati, Daniele Salomone, Cristina Scabbia, Richard Meiz, Andrea Ferro



GUNS N' ROSES

# ABUSE YOUR

★★★★★  
FROM THE  
ARCHIVE  
★★★★★



# ILLUSION

No-shows, bomb scares, police intervention... GN'R's Use Your Illusion tour was one of the most volatile to have ever hit Europe, and one that remained shrouded in mystery. Hammer's sister mag, *Classic Rock*, tracked down the people who were there to get the full inside story

WORDS: GEORGE BIDMEAD



## GUNS N' ROSES



Duff: The King of Beers

Elton and Axl at the Freddie Mercury Tribute, Wembley Stadium, 1992



Axl Rose has had enough. It's June 3, 1992 and we're in Hanover at the Niedersachsen Stadium. He's sitting on the drum riser, a sweaty, seething, 60,000-strong stadium rock crowd swarming in front of him. The band tore onto the stage (on time, for the first time on their massive Use Your Illusion tour), ripped through three songs, but now something's not right. The petulant singer doesn't say one word to the assembled throng, and he's sitting down. Not the usual behaviour for a man who ordinarily races around like a maniac.

Slash, Duff, Matt and Gilby all share confused glances. They're running around, doing their best to cover up, galloping around the stage. The monitors are checked. The teleprompter is checked. And rechecked. Nothing's wrong. Except the singer's behaviour. It's all really strange.

Axl, meanwhile, doesn't move. Then he does. He just wanders to the front of the stage, climbs into the security pit, looks at the audience, then returns to the drum riser and sits down again. And then starts to sing. But not for long...

Blame Bob Dylan. If he hadn't written *Knockin' On Heaven's Door*, GN'R would never have covered it, and Axl wouldn't have berated the edgy Hannover crowd for not singing loudly enough. And then perhaps he wouldn't have introduced *Sweet Child O' Mine* as "a song about getting fucked up the ass by a Coke bottle". But that's exactly what he does. And then he storms off.

Incidents like these characterised Guns N' Roses' Use Your Illusion tour. It wasn't an isolated episode, either. It would get weirder. GN'R were suffering from a media backlash after the massive success of *Appetite For Destruction*. And Axl was getting more and more paranoid. The GN'R on the Illusion tour wasn't the same one we'd seen storm the Marquee in '87 or stun the Donington crowd in '88.

Think about it, a 12-piece Guns N' Roses? It doesn't make sense. Even now, when GN'R means whatever Axl wants it to mean, he'll be stretching credulity if he walks onstage in Birmingham and Wembley this June with a dozen musicians in his band.

But the Guns N' Roses that assembled in Dublin in mid-May 1992 for the start of a 20-date European tour consisted of 12 musicians. It was the culmination of the band's transition from hedonistic heroes to stadium rockers.

It had been a traumatic adjustment costing two of the original members: drummer Steven Adler was fired from the band at the end of 1990 because, unlike the others, he did not cure his heroin addiction. A year later guitarist Izzy Stradlin quit because he could no longer cope with a "cleaned-up" Guns N' Roses – even though he too had cleaned up.

They had been replaced by former Cult drummer Matt Sorum, who had experience of playing big gigs, and guitarist Gilby Clarke who did not have big show experience but had played in various Los Angeles bands like Candy and Kill For Thrills and came out of the same gritty club circuit that had spawned GN'R, Mötley Crüe, Quiet Riot and the rest.

To this reconstituted band had been added keyboard player Dizzy Reed, a female brass trio, a couple of backing singers (also ladies) and Teddy 'ZigZag' Andreadis, who was billed as an "emulator" but also played harmonica and keyboards.

It was Slash who had been mainly responsible for putting together the Guns N' Roses big band.

"Around the time Gilby joined I was looking for some horn players to fill out songs like *November Rain* and get them to sound a bit more like the record," he said in a TV interview.

"Axl really got into that idea too. I didn't want anything corny like three guys in tuxedos all moving in unison, so I got some chicks to do it. But that hasn't changed the way we play," he added. "It's as chaotic as it's always been."

Pressed about tensions within the band Slash replied, "This band's always been tense because, you know, this isn't like a day job. Most bands these days could go out and do their show in their sleep. We go out there all stirred up. We care about every show we do, so if something happens during a particular show then yeah, it can get pretty tense. The way we treat it is to go

Axl and Slash: star power



out and do the best show we possibly can. It's not premeditated, we just go for it."

Anyone thinking that a 12-piece band couldn't "just go for it" was reckoning without Guns N' Roses' attitude. For a start, there was no setlist. Even the opening number wasn't decided

## YOU JUST COULDN'T PREDICT WHAT TIME AXL WOULD SHOW UP. OR WHAT HE'D DO. OR WHAT HE'D SAY

upon until a minute or two before the band hit the stage. Of course, that kind of spontaneity might be fine and dandy in a small, sweaty club packed with adoring fans, but in front of 50,000–100,000 people? Not to mention the lighting guy controlling 900 lights and half a dozen guys operating follow-spotlights precariously perched above the stage, each waiting for instructions.

And then there was the erratic behaviour of Axl Rose. You couldn't predict what time he and the band would come onstage – although you could generally guarantee that it wouldn't be within 30 minutes of the scheduled time. You couldn't predict what he'd do when he got there either: what he'd say or how he'd react to the music, the audience, anything...

No wonder the road crew were always fully focussed as showtime-plus-30 approached. Most bands leave nothing to chance when it comes to stadium shows – even The Rolling Stones have used backing tapes. But Guns N' Roses deliberately put their stadium shows on a knife edge. That meant the

shows could be stunning. By the same token they could also be shambolic. But Guns N' Roses knew no other way.

Not that the critics saw it that way. To them, the band they'd championed had sold out. Even worse, they'd become hugely popular. "Just another stadium act, up there with the fatted turkeys," according to *Melody Maker*. "A saddening musical mess," said *Kerrang!*.

But then Guns N' Roses had gone to war with the press and the 'build-'em-up, slag-'em-off' mentality. Demanding copy approval was guaranteed to rile any journalist, but it was another part of the Guns N' Roses attitude. They'd spelt it out on *Get In The Ring* on their *Use Your Illusion II* album. For the crowds who flocked to see them, however, the air of excitement in the (frequently extended) build-up to the show told its own story.

Security, or Axl's paranoia, had reached ridiculous heights. He wanted control... complete control. Legal documents flew about backstage – disclaimers, gag orders, the lot. And these weren't just for those nearest and dearest to the band. No one escaped unscathed. Not the crew, not the caterers, not the bus drivers, not the support band and their associates. No one. All these years later, people who were on the tour only agreed to speak with us under the shield of strict anonymity, such was the fear of the wrath of God instilled in them. But it's time to break the silence.

The *Use Your Illusion* tour had started in May 1991, four months before the *Use Your Illusion* albums were released. It would carry on for the next 28 months, with 128 shows in 27 countries in front of seven million people.

For the first few weeks the shows ran smoothly, apart from the late starts, but at St Louis, Missouri in early July Axl yelled at security to remove a camera from a fan near the stage, and when nothing happened he leapt into the crowd to deal with the offender himself. The resulting riot left 50 people injured and Axl facing assault charges.



When Axl makes it to the stage, he owns it

Another riot was narrowly avoided a week later in Englewood, Colorado when Axl took exception to a heckler. And later that same month at Inglewood, California police sensibly tore up a traffic ticket they'd issued after Axl's limousine made an illegal left turn outside the Forum and he threatened to cancel the show with 19,000 people already inside.

In contrast, their Wembley Stadium show at the end of August under a baking sun was a relatively restrained affair, although the jobsworths at Brent Council had done their best to pock the bear by demanding that the band desist from swearing onstage. That resulted in posters around London proclaiming 'Guns N' Fucking Roses. Wembley Fucking Stadium. Sold Fucking Out.' The language from the stage was equally blunt.

But the joke had worn too thin for Izzy Stradlin, who'd already taken to travelling separately from the rest of the group. By the time the two separate *Use Your Illusion* albums were released in September he'd gone AWOL, failing to show up for video shoots. A few weeks later it was confirmed that he was leaving.

Slash made the call to Gilby Clarke.

"I knew Gilby before Guns N' Roses even started," he explained. "He was playing in the same clubs that Hollywood Rose [Axl's pre-GN'R group] and bands I was in played at. But I hadn't seen him in all those years."

"His name was brought up by a couple of people and I thought, 'Yeah.' He was the only person we auditioned. I brought him into the studio with us and we jammed and it worked, just like that."

Gilby confirmed that story, while admitting that he had surreptitiously put himself in the frame.

"I'd heard rumours that something was up," he said. "And I'd called a friend of mine who'd worked with the band and said, 'If these guys are looking for someone then put my name in the pot.' And one day I got home and there was the call."

But wasn't he concerned that he could be joining a band on the brink of destruction?

"Yeah, but that's the credit you have to give this band: all the things they've been through and still to be doing all this. For the first week I was coming in every day and not knowing if I was coming back tomorrow. I just had to put everything else to one side and concentrate on learning 40-odd songs."

The 12-piece Guns N' Roses made their debut at Worcester, Massachusetts, in early December followed by three nights at New York's Madison Square Garden. They flew to Japan for three shows that were filmed for a video and made their first foray into South America with a concert in Mexico City at the start of April.

Later that month they flew over for the Freddie Mercury Tribute concert at Wembley Stadium, an unusual move firstly because the band were not best known for playing tribute shows of any description, and secondly because the gay community had taken umbrage with Axl's less-than-sympathetic lyrics on the *One In A Million* song from the *GN'R Lies* album.

But this was not about sexual preference, it was about Queen. As Slash explained: "We grew up with Queen. They were one of the main bands we were into at the start. So when they asked us to play we jumped at the chance. Then we had this whole gay activist thing going against us but we decided to do it anyway."

The band played *Paradise City* and *Knockin' On Heaven's Door* before Axl duetted with Elton John on a version of *Bohemian Rhapsody* that was one of the highlights of the show, and then got to front Queen for *We Will Rock You*. Axl, Slash and Duff then joined in the grand finale: *We Are The Champions*.

So it was a relatively relaxed-looking band that arrived in Dublin to start the European tour. Axl even managed a smile for the brave photographer who greeted him at the airport.

Faith No More, who'd been frequently named as one of Guns N' Roses' favourite bands, were the chosen support band, along with Soundgarden.

"The band felt almost honoured to be asked and it was seen as a great opportunity to play to a whole load of people in Europe," a member of their road crew (let's call him Mr X) told *Classic Rock*.

"But it didn't really work out that way. Most of the kids had just come to see Guns N' Roses and didn't pay any attention to us. And for the amount of time that we were out there we didn't really play that many gigs. We always seemed to be hanging around, waiting a couple of days or more for the next gig."

"I remember being told that some of the band were still in a fragile condition. But that didn't surprise me with everything they'd been through in the last couple of years. And then losing Steven Adler and Izzy – that must have been hard for them. Slash was fine, though. Thriving on it. He carried a bottle of Jack Daniel's with him wherever he went. It was his medication. But he was always nice and friendly whenever you came across him."

"Duff was on vodka and I think he was finding it harder. That's why he had his girlfriend, Linda, with him on the tour. They got engaged midway through the tour and they were really sweet."

"But we scarcely saw Axl. In fact, I don't think many people saw Axl when he wasn't onstage. He was closeted away and there was this whole entourage looking after him. He had a personal assistant. And the personal assistant had an assistant. There was also a chiropractor and a hypnotherapist. And then there was his sister, Amy. There were a lot of people around him."

While Axl was incommunicado, Slash and Duff were happy to talk to the media. And they weren't hiding behind phrases like "musical differences" when it came to the departure of Steven and Izzy.

"Steven Adler just kept on lying," Duff explained. "He kept saying he'd given up. I'd already been round to his dealer's house and threatened to kill him if he sold Steven any more drugs. And one night I went round to Steven's house and pressed the redial button on his phone. And guess where it went? So that was that."

Izzy's departure had also rankled, but in a very different way.

"He went too hardcore, I think," said Duff. "He couldn't just have a couple of beers. He couldn't be around it at all and that was sad. God bless him, that's all I've got to say."

It was an 11-piece band that showed up for a two-hour soundcheck the day before the opening date of the tour at Slane Castle, a picturesque spot on a bend in the River Boyne that provided a natural amphitheatre. No prizes for guessing who didn't make it.

The 250,000-watt sound of the band could be heard in the nearby village of Slane, which was already filling up with fans. Another source remembers passing through the village on the morning of the show.

"This little village had been completely taken over by thousands of kids in headbands and denim jackets," he recalls. "Every now and again some little makeshift band would start up and people would cluster round. And then suddenly they'd get up and lead this big procession round the village and then down this little country lane towards the castle. Obviously loads of them were carrying cans but it was all really peaceful."

Meanwhile the Irish tabloids had been doing their best to whip up a controversy, fearing for those good Catholic Irish girls who might be induced to bare their breasts for the cameras,

## THE REST OF THE BAND HAD ARRIVED IN SLANE BUT AXL'S HELICOPTER HAD NOT EVEN LEFT DUBLIN BY SHOWTIME

They are the champions:  
Slash and Brian May,  
Wembley Stadium, 1992



GETTY

following a growing American tradition that provided pre-show entertainment for the crowd on the giant screens as well as the band backstage.

A police chief was quoted as saying that they would be monitoring the situation closely. Of course, in fact there were more than 800 policeman being drafted in for breast patrol and other more mundane tasks, but they would see more hairy arses than tits as the crowd amused themselves by building human pyramids in front of the stage with the guy at the top getting the chance for a quick moon before the whole edifice collapsed.

The band arrived at the site by helicopter, although Axl's helicopter had still not left Dublin as showtime approached. Still, the rest of the band could console themselves with the crate of 40-year-old Irish whisky and barrel of Guinness that had been sent by U2, who were currently touring Europe with their Zooropa show.

Just over an hour late, the pent-up energy exploded on both sides of the stage as the band ripped into *Nightrain* and *Mr. Brownstone* as Axl, clad in tight back shorts and a black jacket with emerald trimmings, raced from side to side of the 160ft-wide stage like a man possessed while Slash, wearing an emerald green shirt, Gilby and Duff checked out the various ramps and walkways around and above Matt's drumkit.

Maybe the unusual experience of playing in daylight was having a benign effect on them ("Playing in sunshine – it's a new concept," remarked Axl); there was definitely a relaxed feel to the show. Axl attempted to make some Irish heritage connections on behalf of the band – "We have a McKagan in the band, in case you hadn't noticed, and I'm half Irish myself, but you can't tell, right?"

Later on after Duff had taken over his microphone for a version of the Misfits classic *Attitude*, Axl unravelled a new microphone cover and rolled it on.

"Much as I love Duff, I would never share a condom with him," he joked. But the GN'R attitude was never far below the surface. "Here's a nice, pretty song," said Axl after an impassioned performance of *Don't Cry*. "It's dedicated to all those who can't keep their mouths out of your fucking business. Misery likes company so if you know someone like that, call them up and tell them from me that they are DOUBLE TALKIN' JIVE MOTHERFUCKERS!" Cue the song.

Later on, in a rare moment of irony, Axl stamped his foot repeatedly, petulantly yelling "Gimme piano!" until it became apparent that he was standing on top of the instrument as it

rose up from below the stage. He then proceeded to give a short recital, breaking into Black Sabbath's *It's Alright* as Duff sat on the edge of the stage, pummelling his bass with his fists until the song transformed itself into *November Rain*.

Not to be outdone, Slash topped and tailed *Civil War* with a blast of Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Child (Slight Return)*, allowing Axl the chance to nip down to a tiny dressing room below the drum riser and change into another pair of cycling shorts and jacket. Later on, Slash turned the *Theme From The Godfather* into a solo tour de force as part of an instrumental jam that included a drum solo and, on a good night, a bass solo.

A couple of songs had fixed positions in the set: *Mr. Brownstone* was invariably the second number and *Knockin' On Heaven's Door* routinely closed the show before the encores, which always finished with *Paradise City*. But you never knew when the others would crop up. This was tough on the road crew, who had giant

inflatable beasts to blow up for *Welcome To The Jungle* and fireworks to let off during *Live And Let Die*. And the brass section would hang around under the stage on permanent stand-by, never knowing if they'd be needed for the next song.

At Slane Castle the band responded to U2's liquid gift by playing a bit of *One* as the intro to *Sweet Child O' Mine*. As *Knockin' On Heaven's Door* reached its peak Duff was so excited he leapt into the crowd and nearly knocked himself out with his radio pack as he tried to clamber back. As the last strains of *Paradise City* echoed across the Boyne valley, Slash thanked the crowd for "making us so welcome. You've been fucking great."

The band spent another couple of convivial days in Dublin, relaxing in the bars and clubs and watching the girls dressed up in their ball gowns going to the Trinity Ball. Slash in particular was enjoying himself.

"I can always tell a drinking town when the people in the bar get drunk before I do," the guitarist told reporters when they finally headed off to the next leg of the tour in Czechoslovakia.

**P**rague was a sobering contrast. The country was still emerging from 50 years of communist rule and its status as a stag weekend capital was many years away. At the ageing Strahov Stadium the crew found the stage was only half built and were immediately called upon to put their motto – "make it happen" – into practice.

The Czech media were less interested in the sex and drugs and rock'n'roll than the high cost of tickets – around £15, way above the means of most kids. No wonder there was a market for cut-price forgeries, although it was a bit stupid of one forger to advertise his wares on a university noticeboard, complete with a phone number.

Meanwhile, the hotel booked for the band had cancelled the reservation on discovering their identity. They were forced to relocate to a tourist hotel on the edge of town where such basic amenities as room service and a telephone switchboard were deemed unnecessary.

"Fortunately there was a McDonald's in town, which was a lifeline, otherwise the band would have gone crazy," a crew member recalls. "There was virtually a shuttle service operating."

And it wasn't just McD's that was keeping the band busy.

"A couple of the Guns N' Roses guys found this strip club," another source reveals. "They were absolutely fascinated by it because the strippers still had pubic hair."

In the event the show drew a respectable 30,000 crowd. The band opened with *It's So Easy* and Axl told the audience, "Some people talk about how hedonistic we are. Well, sometimes we just write songs about how really fucked up we are."

Slash, however, got closer to the mark: "I guess you guys don't know much English so I'll just say fucking Hil!" Quite what Matt had done to be introduced as "a man made out of all the thick stuff in the bottom of your toilet" was never explained.

In Hungary there was a Hilton Hotel waiting for the band. Unfortunately they arrived at Budapest Airport just 20 minutes before they were due to play, having been held up at Prague airport for four hours by a bomb scare. A police escort whisked the band's motorcade to the Nep Stadium, where 70,000 fans were waiting.

"It was kinda weird to finish our set and then be told that the headline band wasn't even in the country," Mr X tells us. "Still, it was something we'd get used to."

Scarcely had GN'R started their show before a massive thunderstorm drenched first the crowd and then the band as

water poured through the roof of the stage. As roadies frantically wiped the stage with towels between songs Axl remarked, "We're going to be sponsoring a car wash. And we'll all be topless."

The only dry place on stage was by Dizzy Reed's keyboards and Axl called Duff and Gilby "pussies" for trying to take shelter there. Dizzy, meanwhile, tried to show solidarity with the others by pouring a bottle of beer over his head.

Midway through the show the crowd got an unexpected treat. "This is a song that Freddie Mercury asked us to sing to you," Axl announced. "He couldn't be here tonight, he had other plans, so we tried to learn it in the dressing room tonight." He and Slash then played a Hungarian folk song, *Tavaszi szél vizet áraszt,*

(easier to sing than pronounce) that Queen had performed when they came to Budapest in 1985. As the crowd joined in Axl tossed the microphone at them and let them take over.

Back in the Western European comfort zone in Vienna, Axl was in playful form.

"This is kinda tongue in cheek," he mused, introducing *Live And Let Die*. "I wonder if Hitler ever sang this song to himself when he was a kid."

Always a bit of a risk, reminding the Viennese of their most infamous son, but he got away with it.

Vienna was where GN'R and U2's paths crossed on their respective European tours. U2 came to the GN'R show and afterwards Axl and Bono spent more than an hour locked in conversation in a private backstage area.

"They were sharing this private jet that was ferrying each of the bands around from place to place," recalls a journalist who managed to get backstage.

"There was definitely a bit of a mutual admiration society going on. Both bands were trying to challenge the whole idea of



## "THE BAND FOUND THIS STRIP CLUB. THEY WERE AMAZED THE STRIPPERS STILL HAD PUBIC HAIR"

stadium rock. Most bands tend to behave like rock gods when they play stadiums – and with all those adoring masses in front of them it's not hard to see why. But Axl and Bono were both trying to turn the whole stadium rock thing back on the audience, trying to show in their own different ways why it didn't have to be like that. That's what they had in common."

When U2 played the same venue the following night, Bono brought out Axl to sing an acoustic version of *Knockin' On Heaven's Door* with him, adding, "This song could be written for him."

Back in town, Slash and Gilby were so outraged at being charged \$300 for a bottle of champagne in a strip club they forgot to notice the state of the strippers' pubes.

The next part of the tour was focussed on Germany.

"The mood seemed to get a little darker at this point," admits one of the GN'R entourage. "We got to Berlin and when we arrived at the Olympic Stadium where we were playing we could feel the bad vibes there. They were coming out of the walls of the place. Everyone felt it, even the bands. And then we discovered it was the place where [American Black athlete] Jesse Owens had won the 100 metres back in 1936 and Hitler had stormed out in disgust."

Axl caught the mood too. When someone threw a bottle onstage during *Civil War*, suddenly the spectre of those riotous American shows (and no-shows) returned. "Fucking asshole!" screamed Axl. "We can stop the show, you know. It's no problem. Fucking asshole." He made to walk off but the band kept playing. Eventually he started singing again and calmed down with the aid of a cigarette and a rose that he wrapped around the microphone. At the end he even managed to incorporate a few lines from Pink Floyd's *Another Brick In The Wall* into *Paradise City*.

At Stuttgart there was another incident that typified the Guns N' Roses attitude.

"I standing in the production office and at this point it's not even an hour late so no one's panicking," divulges a source. "Somebody's asking the sound guy out front what the NWA track he played just before the show a week or so ago was because Axl wants to hear it again. The sound guy says he hasn't got it with him so what else would Axl like to hear?"

"Next thing, there's a car being organised to go back to the hotel and search the sound guy's room for the NWA CD. So that takes another hour. But the amazing thing is that the song they played just before the band came on was Sid Vicious's *My Way*. I don't know whether they couldn't find the CD or whether Axl changed his mind again."

The tour was heading towards Paris, where the show was going to be broadcast live on the American HBO channel.

"This meant the show was going to have to start on time because there was no way an HBO audience was going to sit and stare at an empty stage for an hour or so," another of Faith No More's crew told us.

In Paris a day had been set aside to rehearse at the Hippodrome De Vincennes with the special guests who'd come in to bolster the HBO show, people like Steven Tyler and Joe Perry from Aerosmith, Lenny Kravitz and Jeff Beck.

"I'm a huge Jeff Beck fan so I went down to have a look," says a member of GNR's crew. "And I watched Slash, Joe Perry and Jeff Beck jamming away on *Train Kept A Rollin'* for nearly half an hour. Can you imagine? That for me was the musical highlight of the whole tour. But the next morning Jeff Beck has gone back to England, complaining of tinnitus."

As well as Lenny, Joe and Steven, Slash's girlfriend had also showed up so he was feeling good, but Axl's girlfriend, model Stephanie Seymour, had not and he had not been sleeping well. In fact he had not been sleeping at all.

To the relief of everyone at HBO the show started on time, Lenny Kravitz came out to play *Mama Said* and all went well until Axl, who was wearing his 'Nobody Knows I'm A Lesbian' t-shirt, dedicated *Double Talkin' Jive* to Warren Beatty, "a man whose life is so empty he has to fuck around with other people's minds and play fucking games".

The fact that Beatty was Stephanie's previous boyfriend might have had something to do with it.

The rant seemed to clear Axl's head and, apart from describing *November Rain* as "a song about unrequited love" (Stephanie had, of course, been in the video) there were no more difficult moments for HBO – apart from the swearing, which they'd presumably been warned about. Steven Tyler and Joe Perry were saved for the encores and everyone – even Axl – joined in on storming versions of *Mama Kin* and *Train Kept A Rollin'*.

Two free days in Paris before the next show in Manchester should have been enough to clear Axl's sleepless head but instead things got worse.

"I was told that Axl went to see his favourite statue, The Winged Victory [of Samothrace], which is in the Louvre," recalls Mr X. "But he didn't disguise himself or anything so he ended up getting pestered by all these people."

"And then he agrees to go on a boat trip down the river Seine but on the way to the boat he nods off for a minute or so,

Slash: "medicinal" Jack Daniel's just out of shot



which is the worst thing that can happen when you haven't slept for days. After about 10 minutes on the boat he wants to get off but there's nowhere for the boat to pull in. So he's on the boat for another half hour before he can get off. And by then he's real mad!"

The Manchester show was postponed the night before it was due to take place. Instead, the band flew to London for their third appearance at Wembley Stadium within 10 months, and the hottest yet in terms of performance and weather. Three thousand people were treated for heat exhaustion during the course of a very long day.

This time they repaid the favour to Queen, bringing Brian May on for the encores and playing *Tie Your Mother Down* and *We Will Rock You*. Earlier in the show they had also played *Sail Away Sweet Sister* (a May song from *The Game*) as an intro for *Sweet Child O' Mine*, something they had been doing regularly on the tour.

The next day's rescheduled Manchester show started nearly two hours late after the band took their time getting there, but Gateshead a couple of days later was a lot livelier. After both shows the band flew back to the Conrad Hotel in London's Chelsea Basin, staying for 10 days.

"It was a real rock'n'roll hotel at that point," an insider says. "There's INXS hanging out in the bar with Slash and Duff" ▶

## GUNS N' ROSES



Guns N' Roses (left to right): Dizzy Reed, Gilby Clarke, Duff McKagan, Axl Rose, Slash, Matt Sorum

and Dizzy and Matt, and Duff's planning to go into a studio nearby to do some stuff for his solo album. Axl is nowhere to be seen, obviously, but everyone's laughing because apparently he had demanded to be flown by helicopter to the Wembley show but there was nowhere for him to land there and the helicopter ended up dropping him off further away than when he'd started.

"Prince was also staying at the hotel because he was playing concerts at Earls Court nearby, and the hotel staff were saying they'd had to remove every piece of furniture from his suite and he'd had his own bed and everything – even the sheets – flown in from America. They'd also had to black out all the windows so that he wouldn't see daylight and then he'd demanded that they open up the hair salon for him at two in the morning."

The Guns N' Roses tour resumed in Germany and it was a chance for Heathrow Airport customs officials to single out Axl's luggage for the third degree for the second time in a month. He was so cross he made a statement: "To be singled out by someone who just wants to score a few points and have a story to tell his friends over a beer is really out of order," he complained.

Their show at Würzburg was accompanied by the full Wagnerian backdrop of thunder and lightning, and the steam rising from the crowd made it hard for those at the back to see the stage. After the next day's show in Basel, Switzerland, Duff developed flu symptoms and Axl had a sore throat. Medication got them both through the next show in Rotterdam, Holland, which started more than two hours late. The authorities decided to abandon the curfew after Axl told the crowd, "You have a right to a complete show. You paid for it. If they cut the power, be my guests, do what you want."

Afterwards Duff was officially declared ill and the following night's show in Gent, Belgium, was cancelled. The band moved on to Milan, Italy, where Axl's recovery was aided by the arrival of Stephanie Seymour. Meanwhile, Slash and Gilby made a brief

extra-curricular trip to Munich to take part in the filming of Michael Jackson's video for *Give In To Me*.

After a rousing show in Turin, Italy, the band and close entourage took a two-day break on a luxury cruiser in the Med before heading across to Seville in Spain where they could bask in a culture that didn't bother with words like 'curfew'. This turned out to be the last gig of the tour when the Madrid stadium they were due to play was suddenly closed by the authorities when the building was found to be at risk from aluminosis, which threatened its structural integrity.

"By the end of the tour we were spending more time hanging around than working," confides Mr X. "Faith No More were getting pissed at some of Axl's antics. But that fact was that whatever it took to get the guy onstage, when he got there it was just mesmerising. You couldn't take your eyes off him. I've never seen any band produce that kind of excitement in a stadium before or since."

Faith No More continued to support Guns N' Roses on their American stadium tour with Metallica, which started later in July. The schedule was repeatedly interrupted by damage to Axl's vocal cords and burns to James Hetfield's arm.

In November Guns N' Roses headed down to South America for a tour that was buffeted by torrential rain, collapsing stages and a military coup in Venezuela that started just as the band went onstage in a massive parking lot (nobody had been able to find a suitable venue). The band managed to get out but their equipment and half the road crew was left stranded at the airport. Even Axl couldn't compete with that. **H**

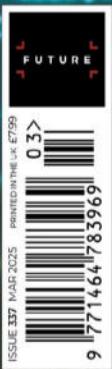
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THE REVIEWS

98

# SLIPKNOT

Iowa's nu metal icons go back to 1999

90

# KILLSWITCH ENGAGE

Jesse and co make a plea for unity

EDITED BY: JONATHAN SELZER • PICTURE: KATJA OGRIN

90 ALBUM REVIEWS

92 LACUNA COIL

93 DREAM THEATER

94 JINJER

96 SAOR

97 SICKSENSE

98 LIVE REVIEWS

100 FUTURE PALACE

101 MYLES KENNEDY

102 OBITUARY

103 WHILE SHE SLEEPS

104 GRAPHIC NATURE

105 THE PRODIGY

Killswitch Engage put their best faces forward



# KILLSWITCH ENGAGE

*This Consequence*

METAL BLADE

*Westfield's metalcore masters return in furious form*

IT'S BEEN SIX years since Killswitch Engage released *Atonement*, marking their longest gap between albums by far. The pandemic during that period appears to have been on vocalist Jesse Leach's mind during the crafting of the band's ninth album. He's spoken about his consequent mental struggles, his initial rage and frustration turning to sadness and despair

at the fractured state of the world. That journey can be heard throughout *This Consequence*. Jesse expresses feelings of loneliness and abandonment with furious anger, before calls for humanity to unite and heal come soaring in. His lyrics can often be cloaked in metaphor, but his passionate delivery always connects deeply, and here he's sparked the strongest KSE album in well over a decade.

The opening  
*Abandon Us* is

classic Killswitch – all metallic hardcore riffs, rhythms that will get you spin-kicking around your bedroom and some brilliantly bold, chest-beating vocals. But Jesse's enraged, impassioned referencing of all he had being 'turned to dust' and being 'left to bleed' elevates the song and steals the show.

Jesse has rarely sounded as seething and fucked off as he does here. Even in the melodic sections, he sounds like his brain is about to combust, each syllable spat out with a ruthlessness you can't help but be swept up by. The death metal vocals on *Collusion* make David Vincent sound like Sabrina Carpenter. Jesse Leach is on one, and it slaps.

## JESSE HAS RARELY SOUNDED THIS SEETHING AND FUCKED OFF



Of course, this would mean little if the rest of the band didn't match their vocalist. When KSE step up their trademark metalcore a notch, as on the grinding, thrashing opening of *The Fall Of Us*, it's as heavy as they've ever sounded. If you were told *Discordant Nation* was Cannibal Corpse with Jesse guesting, you wouldn't have blinked. There's even a NOLA sludge and Alice in Chains mash-up, *Broken Glass*, which is suffocatingly heavy and achingly melodic.

While this is unquestionably the hardest, often darkest and most frenzied Killswitch album in some time, their belief in affirmation and self-betterment remains. Jesse continues to be a force for

good in the metal scene, and has always preached strength through unity. His stirring call of 'I believe, there is hope for better days' on *I Believe* shows that a positive core and desire for solidarity remains a key part of his identity.

After a couple of decent albums and a huge break before this one, you'd be forgiven for worrying that Killswitch Engage might enter into a period of diminishing returns. But *This Consequence* sees them roaring back to classic form, possibly even heavier, just as emotionally raw, and still the leaders of the metalcore pack. It's a pleasure to have them back.

**FOR FANS OF:** Unearth, Parkway Drive, Darkest Hour

STEPHEN HILL



## ABDUCTION

*Existentialismus*

CANDLELIGHT

**UKBM** torchbearer delivers some familiar disgust

In a little under a decade, Abduction have become one of the leading faces of UK black metal, driven by the steely focus of primary member A | V. This fifth album is the first recorded by his full live band. A | V remains the North Star, stretching his throat into a one-man nest of snakes gurgling and writhing, before breaking into pained, wailing melody on *Razors Of Occam*. But with more hands on deck there's a whiff more convention to the playing. With its latter-third tempo crunch and the barbed insistence of A | V's howls throughout, *A Legacy Of Sores* adds forcefulness to an otherwise often homogenous affair.

**FOR FANS OF:** Dead Can Dance, Coil, My Dying Bride

CHRIS CHANTLER



## ERIC BASS PRESENTS

*I Had A Name*

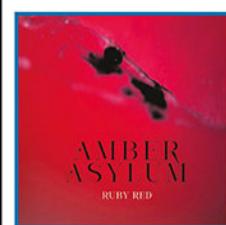
ERIC BASS PRESENTS

*Shinedown* bassist sets off on his own eclectic, conceptual path

Shinedown bassist Eric Bass has crafted a captivating and memorable solo debut. Solely responsible for the writing, performance, and production, he delivers a personal, introspective, and immersive concept album that comes with an accompanying graphic novel. Lead single *Mind Control* is an accessible album entry point, but each track proves distinct and brings to mind everything from Pink Floyd and SOAD to Mike Patton and musical theatre, as Eric flexes his creative licence. Shinedown hinted at his potential talent and vocal prowess, but this project has enabled him to fully realise his artistic vision. While the musical style and flamboyance may not appeal to all, it's an imaginative and exhilarating journey.

**FOR FANS OF:** My Chemical Romance, Queen, Coheed And Cambria

NIK YOUNG



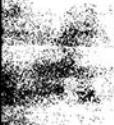
## AMBER ASYLUM

*Ruby Red*

PROPHECY PRODUCTIONS

*San Fran cat gut collective sculpt beauty from darkness*

Formed in 1990 by longtime collaborator with Neurosis and Swans, Kris Force, Amber Asylum's sublime, immersive, atmospheric power is discreetly legendary at this point. Their gothic ambient drone-folk and neo-classical artistry has long gifted savvy metalheads the perfect scenario for 3am post-headbang comedown



Lacuna Coil have another album to crow about



# LACUNA COIL

*Sleepless Empire*

CENTURY MEDIA

Gothic metal maestros lean into their heavy side

## LACUNA COIL'S LATTER-DAY

career has been an exercise in resilience and reinvention. After a mid-career wobble, where albums like *Shallow Life* missed their earlier spark, the Italian gothic metal icons came storming back with *Black Anima*. Their heaviest album to date, it was dark, uncompromising and full of bite, reminding the world why Lacuna Coil have always been more than just scene staples. Now, with *Sleepless Empire*, they've gone even heavier, delivering an album packed with bone-crushing riffs, haunting melodies, and the kind of unrelenting energy that feels fresh yet unmistakably theirs.

The *Siege* crashes in with dense riffs and primal energy. Andrea Ferro's guttural growls anchor the chaos, while Cristina Scabbia's soaring lines slice through the mix with surgical precision. *Oxygen* and *Scarecrow* follow, their djent-inspired grooves and subtle synth layers adding depth without dulling the aggression. *Scarecrow* in particular is hypnotic, balancing weight and atmosphere to draw you further into the album's microcosm.



Lacuna Coil excel in making the heavy sound hooky. *Gravity* is brooding and dark, but its anthemic chorus feels tailor-made for festival pits. On the crushing, groove-laden *In The Mean Time*, featuring New Years Day's Ash Costello, Cristina's fiery chorus provides the perfect counterpoint to Ash's fierce delivery.

Marco Coti Zelati leaves an indelible mark on *Sleepless Empire*. Not only do his crushing riffs and bass form the backbone of its sound, his layered synths and sharp production tie everything together. The sonic palette balances raw intensity with rich textures – a hallmark of Lacuna Coil's modern era.

Andrea's vocal performance deserves its own spotlight. His career-spanning adaptability as a vocalist shines here, as his growls reach new depths of intensity. Relentless, raw and commanding, he's the perfect counterpart to the album's crushing weight, his brutal, gutteral vocals meeting the sonic swell head-on. It's a standout showing that cements his role in the band's harder-hitting direction.

Not everything lands perfectly. *Hosting The Shadow*, featuring Randy Blythe, feels more like a showcase for the Lamb Of God frontman than a cohesive Lacuna Coil track. But even here, the explosive chorus reminds you why the band still dominate. Ironically, the title track channels LOG's energy even better, evoking the pummelling intensity of *512*.

Elsewhere, *I Wish You Were Dead* leans into sleazy 80s glam rock swagger, while *In Nomine Patris* delivers all-out stadium grandeur. Cristina's triumphant cry of 'I'll build my empire' is pure gothic metal theatre, and the shredding guitar solo that follows is a chef's kiss moment. *Sleep Paralysis*, with its eerie atmospherics and Andrea's unrelenting force, leaves another lasting impression.

With *Sleepless Empire*, Lacuna Coil dive headfirst into their heavier side – and it works. This is a band that's unafraid to evolve, to experiment and to hit hard. Gothic metal's crown isn't going anywhere anytime soon.



FOR FANS OF: Epica, Make Them Suffer, Amaranthe

HOLLY WRIGHT

**BENTHIC***Sanguine*

LIFEFORCE

*Post-hardcore crew make an overly hesitant return*

Nine years separates German post-hardcore outfit Benthic's first EP, *The Mess*, and this debut full-length, but they're looking to make up for lost time and kickstart their journey once more. *Sanguine* shifts comfortably between the heavy and the harmonious, with songs such as *Murmur*, *Pitch And Tar* and *The Stranger* moving from screamed vocals and breakdowns to clean sung choruses and melodic guitar lines. And yet there is an overriding feeling of safety about the album. The band don't seem willing to move up from second gear, as if they're dipping their toes back into the water rather than diving in with reckless abandon. After so long between releases, you might forgive any apprehension, but future releases will need to show more bite if Benthic are going to stand tall among their peers.

**FOR FANS OF:** Alexisonfire, Thrice, Finch

**ELLIOT LEAVER**

was written following the passing of a loved one, and singer Sarafina Bortolon-Vettor's bruised vocals acutely convey the pain of grief while the album is bookended by two interludes of screeching, unbearable noise. However, this is a much more vivid, immediate album than the band's cold 2022 debut, *Malocchio. My Love Remains The Same (Kisses Goodbye)* evokes Reading shoegaze pioneers Slowdive at their brightest and most crystalline, while *Hellmouth* glimmers in the shadows like a glossy The Sisters Of Mercy anthem buried under the howling roar of thick Sabbath guitars. Despite their heavy subject matter, these tracks are deceptively earwormy and moreish.

**FOR FANS OF:** Slowdive, The Sisters Of Mercy, Joy Division

**DANNI LEIVERS****BRONCO***Bronco*

MAGNETIC EYE

*US sludge debutants go on a wild, seismic ride*

Formed in Cape Fear, North Carolina out of the ashes of promising stoner rockers Toke, sludge merchants Bronco aren't pulling any punches on their debut album. Taking an unflinching look at success, survival and life's let-downs, the themes of their self-titled LP are just as heavy as their monstrous, molar-rattling riffs. Opener *Scourge Descent*, which is full of wah wah pedal-induced bass wobbles and Southern rock guitar solos, really impresses, as does the pummelling, early Queens Of The Stone Age-indebted *Light Of God*. Elsewhere, their cover of *Night The Lights Went Out In Georgia* – which was made famous

by country queen Reba McEntire – is a weird but welcome curveball, and fuses gravel-gargling growls and howls with the grooves and moods of *Tusk*-era Fleetwood Mac, while the doom-laden, unfathomably heavy T.O.N.S. suggests Bronco have the potential to be future thoroughbreds.

**FOR FANS OF:** Down, Black Tusk, Weedeater

**EDWIN McFEE****DISRUPTED***Stinking Death*

TRUST NO ONE

*Scabby-knuckled Swedish death with a lust for crust*

It makes sense that the follow-up to 2015's *Morbid Death* and 2020's *Pure Death* should be called *Stinking Death*. The stench of the old school is at suffocation levels on Disrupted's third album, and an enthusiastic adherence to a strict, filth-ridden sonic code is plain from the opening uproar of *Choke On The Cross*. This is Swedish death metal in extremis, and one of the most inarguably authentic albums of its kind in years.

Powering forward with ex-Katatonia drummer Daniel Liljekvist handling the heaviest weaponry, songs like *Vile Impalement* and *Deflesh The Dead* bat away fears of lazy nostalgia with violent force. *Coffin Breath* and *Spew* are instant, blood-soaked anthems. *Graveyard Torment* is a disgustingly heavy sprint down the left-hand path. Disrupted love death metal and it shows. *Stinking Death* is a dose of the good stuff, uncut and dangerous.

**FOR FANS OF:** Entombed, Lik, Interment

**DOM LAWSON****BONNIE TRASH***Mourning You*

HAND DRAWN DRACULA

*Ontario's gothic, atmospheric rockers channel their grief*

Ontario four-piece Bonnie Trash create a blend of doom, goth, shoegaze and post-punk that is moody, heady and instantly captivating. *Mourning You*



Dream Theater have unveiled the stuff of nightmares

**DREAM THEATER***Parasomnia*

INSIDEOUTMUSIC

*Prog metal's kingpins get revitalised by their prodigal son*

**THE DADDY OF** prog metal drumming finally came home with the milk. Almost 40 years after co-founding Dream Theater and 13 since leaving to explore other musical avenues, Mike Portnoy returned in 2023 to much jubilation. If excitement was already at red-hot levels, it boiled over with the news that the New Yorkers were immediately starting work on album 16.

*Parasomnia* is as forward-thinking as you can get while offering a heavy dose of nostalgia. Co-written by Portnoy, it carries a darkness seldom tapped during the band's decade-and-a-bit with predecessor Mike Mangini. *Night Terror* matches the overtones of its title, as ominous arpeggios ring from John Petrucci's guitar. Yet it's also a celebration of Dream Theater's 'classic' line-up reuniting. During the 10-minute single, and on the equally impressive, double-the-length finale, *The Shadow Man Incident*, keyboardist Jordan Rudess busts out wobbly solos atop Portnoy and bassist John Myung's erratic rhythms. Frontman James LaBrie gets his time in the sun too, sinking his teeth into some particularly powerful choruses.

It's not all yesterday's news; *Parasomnia* also dares towards new extremes, as evidenced by this being DT's first concept piece in nine years. Opening instrumental *In The Arms Of Morpheus* smartly establishes the album's focus on nightmares, using a ringing alarm clock as percussion. *Dead Asleep* unchains one of John Petrucci's most face-scrunching riffs, while *Midnight Messiah*, *Are We Dreaming?* and *Bend The Clock* form an expansive mini-odyssey where ambitious speed metal segues into an ambient interlude, then an absorbing, rising ballad.

To even have a chance of meeting the hype, *Parasomnia* needed to be *immaculate*, and it stands as an achievement beyond expectation. Not only have the 'old' Dream Theater returned in majestic form, they're as innovative as they were the first time they rode side-by-side.



**FOR FANS OF:** Fates Warning, Haken, Queensrÿche

**MATT MILLS**

## ALBUM REVIEWS



Jinjer's fifth album is a barnstormer

### JINJER

#### Duel NAPALM

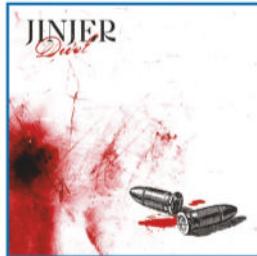
*Ukraine's progressive metal champions go deeper into the maelstrom*

A LOT HAS happened in Jinjer's world since they released 2021's exceptional *Wallflowers* album. In those four years, the Ukrainians' profile and popularity have skyrocketed; they've toured with Slipknot, Disturbed and Bullet For My Valentine, and have drawn massive main stage crowds at summer festivals. They've defied expectations that a band this progressive, aggressive and knotty would remain on metal's fringes.

They've also become staunch ambassadors for their homeland, following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine – a trauma that is palpably etched into the steely fabric of fifth album, *Duel*. 'Have you heard of the storm / That uprooted my home?' sings Tatiana Shmayluk, on dependably fantastic form as always, as she segues effortlessly between harsh and clean vocals, and bellows 'I turned into nothing, I won't be the same' over doomy, convulsing riffs on *Tumbleweed*. Single *Rogue*, the most uncompromisingly brutal song the band have put out, is a 0–100mph aural battering. With no intro and no build-up, it sounds like a blistering attack on Vladimir Putin: 'Collecting blood is his ambition. He sets so light the value upon lives.'

Jinjer's monstrous groove-tech sound is instantly recognisable. But if *Wallflowers* saw them eschew the whirlwind chaos of their earlier albums, where progressive metal clashed impulsively with jazz, prog and metalcore for something more refined, *Duel* is a darker, less immediate beast. The labyrinthine *Hedonist* and *Kafka* aren't the kind of tracks you chuck on for a bit of casual listening; they're less melodic and difficult to follow. Understandably, writing an album of bangers was clearly the last thing on the band's minds, but the 'Draw your weapon!' command of *Fast Draw* is one of the few moments that feel ready-made for fist-pumping crowds. *Duel*, much like the band that created it, is one tough cookie, but is very much worth your perseverance.

■■■■■■■■■■■■  
**FOR FANS OF:** Gojira, Lamb Of God, Meshuggah  
DANNII LEIVERS



### DYNAZTY

#### Game Of Faces

NUCLEAR BLAST

*Stockholm's Eurovision-mad power metallers get on the grecé train*

Making the heats for Eurovision used to be the kiss of death for a band's credibility and career – just ask Royston Vasey-based glam rockers Crème Brûlée. Not so for these Swedish power metal featherweights who flunked out in 2011 and 2012, yet here present their ninth album in 16 years – their first for Nuclear Blast. The classy sleeve art is wholly at odds with the rest of the Dynazty experience, which is rather like being smacked around the head with a well-stacked cheeseboard. The ridiculously perky *Devilry Of Ecstasy* could have been written for a top-tier 80s keep fit video, but between the parping synths, Euro-poppy clichés and over-exuberant cringe, fists will rise.

■■■■■■■■■■■■  
**FOR FANS OF:** Amaranthe, Beast In Black, Dragonforce  
CHRIS CHANTLER



### GRÅB

#### Kremess

PROPHECY PRODUCTIONS

*Ex-Dark Fortress frontman invokes the spirits of Bavarian folklore*

The German state of Bavaria possesses a distinct dialect and cultural identity, and that tradition informs the spectral black metal of Gråb, who sound like a funeral procession through the snowy Alps. The archaic, medieval atmosphere of early Satyricon provides a roadmap, similarly taking

on a folky disposition without tipping into jauntiness. The heavy usage of hammered dulcimer really colours the frame, however, and those melodies are frequently highly intricate. Fronted by Grånt, who originally fronted Dark Fortress on 2000s classics like *Tales From Eternal Dusk*, his old cohort, V. Santura, now of Triptykon, adds a guest lead to *Dà Letzte Winter* and seals what a richly expressive record this is.

■■■■■■■■■■■■  
**FOR FANS OF:** Satyricon, Dark Fortress, Stangarigel  
PERRAN HELYES



### MARKO HIETALA

#### Roses From The Deep

NUCLEAR BLAST

*Former Nightwish bassist finds a familiar face on his personal path*

The second solo album from ex-Nightwish bassist/vocalist Marko Hietala is a genre-spanning affair, laced with his devilish sense of humour. *Frankenstein's Wife* is an infectious, hard-rocking graveyard romp, while *Proud Whore* is sleazy rock'n'roll elevated by Marko's soaring vocals. But while *The Devil You Know*'s kooky, dark Americana is an entertaining diversion, the plethora of musical styles can end up feeling disjointed, as on the sprawling *Dragon Must Die*. *Left On Mars*, a poignant duet with former bandmate Tarja Turunen, is a gorgeous, time-stopping ode to feeling like an outsider, made all the more poignant when you consider the extent to which these two must know how that feels as they carve out their own musical paths.

■■■■■■■■■■■■  
**FOR FANS OF:** Nightwish, Tarja, Tarot  
CATHERINE MORRIS

## SMALL MERCIES

*Where EP is short for 'Epic Potential'*



### BALEFIRE

#### Balefire

IRON BONEHEAD

Incantation bassist Chuck Sherwood takes death metal even further down the infernal pipe on this pugnacious and unholy six-tracker. Warped, mysterious and raw, *Balefire* is wickedly compelling.

■■■■■■■■■■■■  
**DOM LAWSON**



### THE DEAD AND THE LIVING

#### Damage

REXUS

This goth rock space oddity sucks these Swedes into a swirling black hole of gravelly howls, gargantuan instrumentals and sparkling 80s synths. Staggeringly cinematic.

■■■■■■■■■■■■  
**EMILY SWINGLE**



### SUNROT

#### Passages

PROSTHETIC

This fearsomely left-wing New Jersey sludge quintet feel unnaturally squeezed by the 16-minute runtime. Hemmed in by creepy ambient noise clips, both songs deserve more space to build.

■■■■■■■■■■■■  
**CHRIS CHANTLER**

**JAYE JAYLE***After Alter*

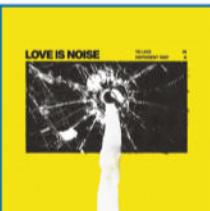
PELAGIC

*Dark, stark, ruminations from Emma Ruth Rundle's collaborators*

Beginning life as a solo project for Kentucky musician Evan Patterson, Jaye Jayle have bloomed over almost a decade into a dissonant full project, often found as Emma Ruth Rundle's backing band. Collaborating again with Chelsea Wolfe co-conspirator Ben Chisholm, this fifth album is the most fully realised vision of Evan's desire to explore dark, avant-garde sonic territory yet. Opener *Father Fiction* combines pulsating bass and battered piano chords with a soulful duet between Evan and Victoria Fisher, like a darker take on the Stones' *Gimme Shelter*. *Small Dark Voices* builds from stark, desolate bass into sweeping synth orchestration, gradually finding a semblance of hope in the lyrical couplet: 'I'll be your tears if you can take the pain, I'll be your sun if you can give me shade.' A deeply resonant and subtly terrifying work.

**FOR FANS OF:** David Lynch, Mark Lanegan, Nick Cave And The Bad Seeds

REMFY DEDMAN

**LOVE IS NOISE***To Live In A Different Way*

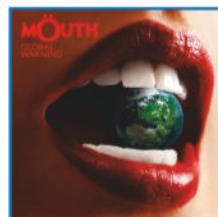
CENTURY MEDIA

*A supremely sourced smorgasbord of post-hardcore atmospherics*

*To Live In A Different Way* could be the first truly great debut album of 2025. Love Is Noise is the solo project of

one Cameron Humphrey, who has made a grooving, bobbing, cinematic album of shoegazing, spirit-lifting and hard-riffing ragers. Cameron is obviously a fan of everyone from My Bloody Valentine through Deftones, Turnstile and Fugazi to Every Time I Die, mixing endless elements of thoughtful alternative music into some fantastically cohesive and catchy rock songs. He grinds like The Dillinger Escape Plan at their most manic right at the end of album highlight *take.one.minute*, having spent the rest of the song gliding along like a late-90s The Flaming Lips reboot. It does more in one song than some bands manage in an entire album. Superb stuff.

**FOR FANS OF:** Deftones, Loathe, Jane's Addiction  
STEPHEN HILL

**MÖUTH***Global Warning*

BONEBAG

*Swedish newcomers blend stoner and indie with mixed results*

You can usually trust a band with gratuitous umlauts to bring a bit of scuzz to the table, and Möuth certainly sound like they could show you the less salubrious side of town. Their guitar tone is positively filthy at times, and they hover above some twilight crossroads where doomy sludge, stoner metal, psychedelia and indie rock meet. Opener *Holy Ground* kicks things off with a barrage of drums and monolithic riffing, offset by rasping melodies and peals of wailing guitar. It's a strong start that only gets better with the aptly named primitive garage rock of *Dirt*. There are some great moments, but there are also one too many relatively staid tracks, where they

concentrate on the indie grooves when you really want them to go full Stooges. *Global Warning* is a promising debut, but one that still shows room for improvement.

**FOR FANS OF:** Queens Of The Stone Age, Yawning Man, Kvelertak

PAUL TRAVERS

**RETROMORPHOSIS***Psalmus Mortis*

SEASON OF MIST

*Swedish tech death veterans respawn and mutate*

Much like their Swedish countrymen The Halo Effect, Retromorphosis are a reunion of sorts, who are striving to make their own mark. Featuring the bulk of tech death lynchpins Spawn Of Possession, debut album *Psalmus Mortis* has all the fiendish invention and swirling cacophony that fans of the much-missed stalwarts would expect. However, among the blizzard of notes that change direction on a sixpence, ex-Decrepit Birth drummer KC Howard's rhythmic maelstrom, and Dennis Röndum's vocals that scatter like an automatic blunderbuss, every track has a tangible hook at its heart. *Retromorphosis* and *Never To Awake* have an abundance of catchy riffs, while *The Tree* stomps its way through, dragging histrionic leads in its wake. Although the synths can veer from haunting to downright hammy, the sheer enthusiasm of its creators clearly loving being back to what they do pierces through this 42-minute frenzy.

**FOR FANS OF:** Spawn Of Possession, Decapitated, Psycroptic

ADAM BRENNAN



Mantar contemplate a decade's worth of wanton destruction

**MANTAR***Post Apocalyptic Depression*

METAL BLADE

*Teutonic twosome hit the gnarly, anthemic motherlode***WHEN MANTAR****EMERGED**

just over a decade ago, there was some debate about where they sat on the metal spectrum. Their 2014 debut album, *Death By Burning*, was variously described as black metal, noise rock, sludge metal and any number of niche, gnarly subgenres. Since then, Hanno Klänhardt and Eric Sakarya have flourished in their own self-created and perennially tumultuous grey area, where the only thing that really matters is the size of the riff and the amount of ruthless determination used to perform it.

A two-man band that have always sounded like (at the very least) a quartet, Mantar make such an ominous, hateful noise that it would be easy to miss what an incredible rock'n'roll band they have become over the last few years. An even more resounding slap around the face than 2022's *Pain Is Forever And This Is The End, Post Apocalyptic Depression* is still rooted in underground murk, but the Germans are scything and swaggering like never before.

It's no coincidence that many of these new songs stomp and slash along for a succinct three minutes, like a youthful AC/DC, frothing with rabid hostility. Mantar have stripped away much of the unnecessary black metal baggage that occasionally stopped them from getting straight to the point. On anthemic, hard-as-nails howl-alongs such as *Principle Of Command* and *Face Of Torture*, Hanno still spits bile and broken teeth, but it's all over riffs that would bring any discerning arena to its feet.

Making a virtue of abruptness, *Dogma Down*, *Church Of Suck* and *Axe Death Scenario* are two-minute wonders that erupt, eviscerate and then vanish into thin air, while the closing *Cosmic Abortion* spikes the whisky with LSD, sets fire to the amplifiers and freaks out in the flames, powered by evil rock riffs and a rallying cry of 'Kill! Destroy! Fuck shit up!' Relatable and heavy. Bingo.

**FOR FANS OF:** Black Tusk, Wolvhammer, AC/DC

DOM LAWSON



Saor: Andy Marshall embarks on a soul-searching adventure

# SAOR

## *Amidst The Ruins*

SEASON OF MIST

*Scotland's folk/black metal visionary goes deeper into the wilds*

**INSPIRED BY THE** lineage of European black metal bands who have so effectively imbued their music with their nation's traditional folklore and instrumentation, Andy Marshall, Saor's sole musician, wondered why similar hadn't been done for Scotland. He set out to do just that with his 2013 debut, *Roots*. Five albums later, he's consolidated a legacy of self-coined 'Caledonian metal'. A supporter of Scottish independence, he took the band name from the phrase 'Saor Alba' ('Free Scotland') but distances himself from the political connotations. 'Saor' also means 'unconstrained', suiting his focus of liberation through losing himself in the outstanding beauty of his homeland.

Fascinated by the echoes of the past that dwell in the Highlands' midst, sixth album *Amidst The Ruins* continues where 2022's *Origins* left off – with a bombastic, more cleanly produced interpretation of themes he has stuck to consistently throughout his discography. Its five lengthy tracks comprise exhilarating rushes of black metal, mournful laments and folk instrumentation with lyrics



and poetry inspired by Scottish nature, folklore and heritage.

The epic, 12-minute, titular opening track is an age-old black metal lament for mankind's increasing disconnection from the natural world, its bold blasting giving way to slower sections led by tin whistles and Uilleann pipes, contributed by co-vocalist Ella Zlotos. She brings an ethereal power to the record any time she appears, offering a rousing harmony to Andy's screams and ennobling baritone. *Glen Of Sorrow* recounts tales of battles of old, by turns mournful and savage, while the solemn grace of *The Sylvan Embrace*, featuring Jo Quail on cello, is a love letter to the soulful rejuvenation found when lost in the wilderness.

*Amidst The Ruins* seeks not to reinvent Saor's music, but to ever more boldly define its distinctive cultural identity: wild, anthemic, occasionally dismal and defiantly Scottish.

**FOR FANS OF:** Borknagar, Eluveitie, Cnoc An Tursa

**TOM O'BOYLE**



## THUNDERMOTHER

### *Dirty & Divine*

AFM

*Sweden's mercurial hard rockers up the intensity*

Thundermother have seen significant line-up changes, but founder and riff-machine Filippa Nässil remains the driving force. Here, new vocalist Linnea Vikström Egg's Battle Beast-style power rips through *Can't Put Out The Fire* and *Take The Power*, her energy and lyrical force bringing a live-show intensity. The album leans into classic rock staples too – stadium-sized Van Halen guitars, unison vocals and cowbell – particularly on the Pat Benatar vibes of *Feeling Alright*. The Bon Jovi-indebted *Speaking Of The Devil* adds some nostalgic flair, as *Dirty & Divine* roars into a new era for the band.

**FOR FANS OF:** AC/DC, Bon Jovi, Halestorm  
**HOLLY WRIGHT**



## VENAMORIS

### *To Cross Or To Burn*

IPECAC

*Dave and Paula Lombardo take an intimate trip through the aether*

Helmed by revered drummer Dave Lombardo and his wife Paula, Venamoris's debut glides through dark, atmospheric realms. This is an album rooted in emotive soundscapes and evocative melodies, with Paula's commanding voice and deft songwriting leading the way. From the ethereal balladry of *Stay With Me* to the gothic pulse of *In The Shadows*, the album confidently bridges stylistic borders. *Spiderweb* recalls the immersive, pseudo-torch sound of late-90s trip hop, while *Stain Of Pain* smoulders with restrained melancholy. Even *Animal Magnetism*, with its glistening industrial menace, feels meticulously tailored to Paula's sultry delivery. Guest turns from Alex Skolnick and Gary Holt add grit without overshadowing the album's vision. Captivating and rich with nuance, this is a compelling listen that rewards an open mind.

**FOR FANS OF:** Portishead, Rosalie Cunningham, Massive Attack  
**JOE DALY**

## TRAITORS

### *Phobias*

RECLAIM MUSIC GROUP

*A nu approach from Florida's deathcore insubordinates*

Often derided for their simplistic approach to deathcore, littered with the bits of nu metal that no one liked, Florida's Traitors have defiantly stuck to their guns over their previous four albums. *Phobias* doesn't aim to win over the detractors, meshing the more straight-ahead deathcore of 2019's *Repent* and more seamlessly meshing it with their other key influence. *Break chugs*



## LIVE REVIEWS

# SLIPKNOT

## BLEED FROM WITHIN

O2 ARENA, LONDON

*Iowa's epoch-triggering nu metallers revisit their incendiary debut*

**IT ALWAYS FEELS** a bit weird to be watching a metal show in the pristine confines of London's O2 Arena. Dark, angry, brutal, noisy music is not a natural bedfellow for scandalously expensive, processed cheeseburger meals and adverts for the upcoming *Strictly Come Dancing* tour. It feels even more odd tonight, as a sold-out arena congregates to celebrate one of the most important, intense and violent albums of the last 25 years.

Before that, there's a real feelgood moment, as Scottish groove metallers **BLEED FROM WITHIN** get to perform on one of the biggest stages in the UK. Long-term fans can rightly feel great pride at seeing them scale such heights. They were once one of the best-kept secrets in British metal, constantly grafting in toilet venues, always improving album upon album. Now, two decades in, they can walk onstage and win over an arena of fans while barely breaking a sweat. Vocalist Scott Kennedy absolutely commands the crowd, as if BFW were headlining, and songs such as *Sovereign* sound perfect for this environment, all juddering grooves, massive riffs and Scott's hulking screams. It's all killer, but fantastic new single *In Place of Your Halo* steals the show. On this evidence, their upcoming *Zenith* album could be a classic.

Though it's heartwarming to see *Bleed From Within* succeed after so much hard work, **SLIPKNOT** were never meant to be about good vibes and warm, fuzzy feelings. Tonight is all about celebrating their classic 1999 self-titled debut album, and before they even set foot onstage, there are contradictions to unscramble. Make no mistake about it, the Slipknot of 1999 would surely have been disgusted by the idea of such back-slapping nostalgia. The Nine were all about chaos, unpredictability, the complete and utter rejection and destruction of the past, of lazy, crowd-pleasing stadium rock tropes. Tonight, everyone broadly knows what the setlist will



Bleed From Within capitalise on their moment to shine

THE SET	
SLIPKNOT	
(sic)	
Eyeless	
Wait And Bleed	
Get This	
Eyore	
Tattered & Torn	
Me Inside	
Liberate	
Frail Limb Nursery	
Purity	
Prosthetics	
No Life	
Only One	
ENCORE	
Spit It Out	
Surfacing	
Scissors	

be before they even set foot inside the O2, and the polished, professional musicians on display tonight are a far cry from the ragtag bunch of uncontrollable misfits who wrote these songs.

Except, it's a little bit more complicated than that. Even though Slipknot can't take us back "to the fucking Astoria!" as frontman Corey Taylor announces early in their set, they're still absolutely sensational this evening. Firstly, there's the return of the classic 1999 red jumpsuits and a nod to the original masks – not only the most iconic Slipknot look, but the best. Corey in particular looks far more dangerous, frightening and energetic with his long, dreaded mask on, which has been enhanced with new red, glowing eyes. There's also the fact that, as incredible as the energy they had back in 1999 was, the 2024 version of Slipknot sound far, far better than their

90s counterparts. They're better musicians, a tighter unit and Corey's voice amazingly sounds stronger and more urgent than it has at any point in his career.

Then there are the songs themselves. The opening (*sic*), *Eyeless* and *Wait And Bleed* are obviously legitimate classics and regulars in the Slipknot setlist, but hearing them back-to-back to kick off the set is so, so thrilling. But it's the lesser-heard songs from *Slipknot* that really make tonight something special – a reminder of just how odd and unique an album it is. We get a brilliantly weird, Sid Wilson remix of the creeping *Tattered & Torn*, which, against all the odds, is a possible highlight of the night; *Prosthetics* is pure, bleak, pitch-black, tar-thick hatred made sonic; *Get This* is vein-poppingly intense thrash chaos; and the closing, elongated, ear-destroying mayhem of *Slipknot*'s final track, *Scissors*, has more to do with formless noise rock, no-wave and art rock than it does nu metal.

You also get the sense that this really means something to Slipknot. Corey stops on numerous occasions to take in the capacity crowd, and when he says that no city in the world ever "got" Slipknot like London did all those years ago, rather than it sounding like a line he trots out every night, you genuinely believe him. When you put it all together and consider exactly what kind of band Slipknot were when this album dropped, you start to realise that, actually, yes, this is a landmark well worth celebrating.

The original members of Slipknot surely wouldn't have believed that they would still be a band a quarter of a century after they released their self-titled record, let alone that they'd be capable of selling out two nights in the UK capital's largest indoor venue. The fact that they are and they have is one hell of a feat, and shows like this are clear proof of why they're one of the finest metal bands in history.

STEPHEN HILL



Slipknot put the  
'Pan' back into  
'pandemonium'

Corey Taylor provides  
a conduit for Cthulhu



## LIVE REVIEWS



Future Palace: Maria Lessing rises to the occasion

# FUTURE PALACE

## OUR PROMISE / SEVEN BLOOD

THE GARAGE, LONDON

Berlin's post-hardcore high-risers battle their inner and outer demons

**THERE ARE FLASHING** lights and a loud commotion, and that's even before getting inside The Garage for tonight's German triple-header. Police presence for a nearby football match notwithstanding, openers **SEVEN BLOOD** play an inoffensive blend of alt rock and pop punk featuring catchy choruses and tinges of emo that's well executed but unremarkable. **OUR PROMISE** are clearly so eager to play that they're on 15 minutes early, the sextet filing onstage to an ambient intro and a gradually filling-up room. It's their first ever European tour, and their gratitude for that opportunity is obvious as they smile at the crowd throughout. The two vocalists play off each other's energy, beckoning for pits and walls of death as they trade lines. It's a crowded stage, but the six of them make it work while staying dynamic. This might be their first run here, but it's a polished performance ending on a huge, anthemic note.

**FUTURE PALACE** open with a storming combo of *Malphas* and *A Fool On The Devil's Reins* from this year's excellent *Distortion* album, singer Maria Lessing admitting between songs that she's suffering with a cold and her voice isn't up to her usual standard. You wouldn't know from listening, though; the melodies are clear and her

screams vicious. A *Fool*'s breakdown sees the pit swallow much of the front half of the room – a sight that only grows more common over their hour-plus set.

If there's anything missing, it's that the trio remain largely static, and the bass on backing track doesn't always have the weight it needs. Regardless, the band have only grown in confidence since they last came over, for their first headline tour here in 2023. The new songs sound terrific live, particularly the Eurodance-meets-metalcore of *Decarabia* – which Maria introduces with a heartfelt speech about its themes of depression – and the towering, nu metal rager *The Echoes Of Disparity*, which takes aim at misogyny. The latter sees As Everything Unfolds singer Charlie Rolfe join them, and it sounds even more vital and aggressive than on record. Conspicuously, Future Palace don't play anything from their debut album, 2020's *Escape*, bar an arresting, acoustic rendition of *Lately*, with Maria visibly emotional throughout, before they up the energy again with *Dead Inside*. On only their second UK headline run, Future Palace are bigger, better and leave the crowd beaming.

WILL MARSHALL



Our Promise give The Garage six of the best

## DYING FETUS

### CHELSEA GRIN / DESPISED ICON

ELECTRIC BALLROOM, LONDON

"We only get to play about 20 shows a year," DESPISED ICON apologise, early into a set that doesn't show any sign of rust at all. The Montreal titans' deathcore sounds just as caustic as it always has, and the crowd whip themselves into a frenzy throughout. CHELSEA GRIN seem more interested in making the heaviest, chuggiest noise they can rather than crafting identifiable riffs or hooks, but it's amassed them a decent following that has clearly turned up to lose its collective mind in the pit. DYING FETUS don't even make it through opener *From Womb To Waste* before crowdsurfers are sailing over the barrier, and there's a seething mass of bodies down the front. It becomes a constant sight, with a vicious pit swirling as the trio rip through *Weaken The Structure* and *Intentional Manslaughter*. The Maryland death/grinders' no-frills approach extends to their staging, with just their name in Impact font on a backdrop and a light show heavy on block colours, frequently bathing the stage in hellish reds. Over three decades, Dying Fetus have only improved their command of machine-precise brutality, and tonight is another masterclass in savagery.

WILL MARSHALL

## VOWER

DOWNTAIRS AT THE DOME, LONDON

Realistically, Vower couldn't have asked for a better rookie year. When the alt metal outfit debuted in spring with the single *Shroud*, they were bombarded with a tide of goodwill, thanks to their members' treasured work in previous bands Palm Reader, Black Peaks and Toska. In summer they released EP *Apricity* and played a host of festivals, and now their first headline show will take place before a sold-out Downstairs At The Dome. The Brits have production worthy of the occasion, with erratic spotlights accompanied by LED poles stretching across the backdrop. What's more impressive, though, is the music they've brought along. Vower's back catalogue is just five songs deep, yet it's stuffed with elegant metal, built from tasteful guitar lines and off-kilter drum parts. Josh McKeown's voice has a sharp rasp, even at its most melodic, helping the choruses on *Satellites* and *Eyes Of A Nihilist* become instantly memorable. London's hooked on them, as proven by the crowd yelling five-month-old lyrics like they're vintage anthems. A closing *Shroud*, the song that started it all, sees the evening end in a passionate mosh. "We will continue," says Josh, promising this band aren't just some one-and-done project. Thank fuck for that.

MATT MILLS

# MYLES KENNEDY

## DEVIN TOWNSEND

O2 ACADEMY, BIRMINGHAM

*Ground control and Major Tom forge an alliance in the Midlands*

**IT'S EASY TO** forget just how long Myles Kennedy has been around. Alter Bridge might be celebrating the 20th anniversary of their debut album this year – when its members aren't dipping their toes back in the Creed pool, at least – but it's not until Myles drops a throwaway line about working with drummer Zia Uddin for “nearly 40 years” that you're reminded that he was treading the boards long before he broke through with Tremonti and co, or getting offers to collab with Slash and Led Zeppelin.

It's credit to him that he's using his rock star currency to get **DEVIN TOWNSEND** out on tour as a support. On the surface they might seem like chalk and cheese – the former a Southern rock-flavoured throwback to the old school, the latter a maximalist prog metal maverick. But even stripped down to a solo acoustic performance, Devin's hardly defanged; the plinking of high notes brings an angelic quality, but he still howls, yodels and sings like a one-man choir of judgement. As he cracks jokes throughout, the crowd delight in their not-so-Heavy Devy experience, his wails of “Shut the fuck up, I'm trying to be sensitive!” during *Love?* and an astonishingly squalling *Deadhead* perfectly illustrating why he's so beloved as an iconoclastic force.

“Now, as I like to say, it's back to mediocrity.” **MYLES KENNEDY** is effusive in his praise for Devin, expressing an understandable level of awe. It's no secret that Myles is one of rock's best vocalists, but the twist of his solo work is that he's also a dab hand on guitar, trading in ascendant vocal takes for nifty techniques and flourishes that see him bounce off his backing band. New album songs *The Art Of Letting Go* and *Nothing More To Gain* allow him to flex more Skynyrd influence than is readily apparent in Alter Bridge, or even his work with Slash, while *A Thousand Words* comes with its own *Little Wing*-like flourishes.

With his own warm witticisms, Myles toes the line between star and fan done good, his grandstanding guitar affectations painting him like some long-lost Allman Brother, or at the very least the Black Crowes' Robinson sibling least likely to be involved in a punch-up. Even without the crowd-conquering anthems of his other bands, a cheeky rendition of Alter Bridge's *All Ends Well* and own solo singalong *Miss You When You're Gone* let his voice steal the spotlight, once again reminding us he's an apex performer in 21st-century arena rock and metal.

RICH HOBSON



Devin Townsend: going solo but still star-bound



Myles Kennedy:  
more aristocracy  
than mediocrity

Obituary: still summoning the spirit of the swamp



# OBITUARY

ELECTRIC BRIXTON, LONDON

*Florida's death metal OGs swamp the senses in South London*

**HOURS AFTER DISTRESSING** personal footage of drummer Joe Allen was released on social media, Sadus announced they were leaving the tour to regroup with a replacement. With no time to arrange new support, it's just Obituary tonight. They presumably haven't had time to rehearse new songs, so it's pretty much the same set they've been doing every night.

Obituary are the AC/DC of death metal – if it ain't broke, don't fix it. They may have had a couple of line-up changes, but the core of the band – the Tardy Brothers John and Donald, and Trevor Peres – have remained faithful to their sound for almost four decades. And what a sound. Kicking off with *Redneck Stomp* into *Threatening Skies*, they are an armoured-plated riff bulldozer. Never reliant on blastbeats and hyperspeed, they have always taken a slightly less frenetic approach and are all the heavier for it.

The Celtic Frost-ian DNA is evident in every lead-lined, treacle-thick riff and pummelling drum part. Talking of Frost, the Floridians' cover of *Circle Of The Tyrants* makes a welcome return,

and is just as heavy as it was 34 years ago. Trevor still looks like the undead, albeit more bearded these days; however, his signature guitar sound remains as ominously claustrophobic as ever, while John Tardy still boasts one of the best voices in all of death metal. His trademark yowl is akin to scraping an unprotected leg on tarmac.

The two have lost none of their imposing stage presence. Their set covers 35 years of death metal perfection and putrefaction, with only 2009's *Darkest Day* and 2017's self-titled album not getting a look-in. Tracks such as *War* and *Dying Of Everything* sound just as good as those from their first albums, even to the pickiest of "first three albums only" old-school fans. Back in 1990 when they first hit these shores, they advised fans to bring a change of underwear, and there was no denying that at the time they hit like a hairy landslide. Could any band really retain any of that power after so much time? Confirmed with a final encore of *Slowly We Rot*, for Obituary it was never in doubt.

ALASTAIR RIDDELL

## ALCEST

### SVALBARD

ELECTRIC BRIXTON, LONDON

**SVALBARD** cram Electric Brixton as if they're the headliners, and the turnout is richly deserved. For almost 10 years, the Bristol crusaders have been unloading righteous post-hardcore, lashing out against depression and societal prejudice. This evening's set flaunts their most intense songs, including *Eternal Spirits* and *Faking It* from latest full-length *The Weight Of The Mask*, but singer/guitarist Serena Cherry is all smiles between her screams. The fury quickly dissipates when **ALCEST** arrive. Surrounded by the storks, grass and setting sun from the artwork of new album *Les Chants De L'Aurore*, the blackgaze dreamers look as blissful as they sound. Openers *Komorebi* and *L'Envol*, the first of five *Les Chants...* hymns tonight, bathe London in warm guitar tones and head-bobbing percussion. It's the vocals of singer/guitarist Neige that prove the sweetest, though. His gorgeous, echoing cries give him so much presence that between-song patter is barely necessary. The band's darker, metallic edge creeps in during *Protection* and *Sapphire*, but these 90 minutes are more celebration than angst. Penultimate song *Autre Temps* epitomises the euphoria, with the mass waving to Winterhalter's sombre percussion lifting the elation to an apex.

MATT MILLS

## HELMET

### EARTHTONE9

ELECTRIC BALLROOM, LONDON

It feels like only yesterday that New York noise legends Helmet were celebrating the 20th anniversary of their stunning 1994 album, *Betty* – but they're back to do it again for its 30th. Nottingham late-90s oddities EARTHTONE9 have always been wonderfully idiosyncratic, so their music hasn't aged at all. They zip through songs from latest album *In Resonance Nexus*, which sit snugly next to classics such as *Tat Twam Asi*. Always a pleasure. If **HELMET** had made a different record to *Betty* in the 90s, they could well have been the zeitgeist. As Page Hamilton and his crew wander on and launch into the superb *Wilma's Rainbow*, you're struck by just how delightfully odd and deliberately awkward *Betty* still sounds. Of course, there are riffs – so, so many riffs – but Page's love of jazz, blues and experimental funk continues to come across, and makes a sound that's totally unique even today. No wonder few understood it three decades ago. After completing the album, there's a short break before they return with a triumphant greatest hits and rarities set, inevitably closing with the piston-groove of *In the Meantime*. Book your tickets for 2034 now.

STEPHEN HILL

# WHILE SHE SLEEPS

CURRENTS / THROWN / RESOLVE

THE LEADMILL, SHEFFIELD

*The Steel City's prodigal sons revel in the heart of their community*

**IF WHILE SHE** Sleeps are about anything beyond slamming live shows and blazing anthems, it's fostering a sense of community. Fittingly, they've assembled an impressive line-up for this tour that reads like a United Nations of (mostly) metalcore. French outfit **RESOLVE** kick things off with a set that shakes off the early-doors cobwebs, coating slab-like riffs with a slick, synth-flecked sheen. Sweden's **THROWN** are less carefully measured from the outset, with a barely contained hardcore edge and peals of squalling guitar. There's a twist of nu metal groove in there as well, and the Stockholm-based band make a lot of new friends tonight.

Connecticut's **CURRENTS** are already familiar to a lot of people in the room, and certainly don't do their reputation any harm with a set full of perfectly balanced modern metalcore. They're a little generic on record, but the soaring choruses, lurching breakdowns and clean/scream contrasts all work perfectly in the live arena.

This multinational bill might have served as the perfect warm-up, but it doesn't take long for the first "Yorkshire!" chants to fill the air as **WHILE SHE SLEEPS** take to the stage. *Self Hell* opener *Peace Of Mind* tees things up as a looming intro, before *Leave Me Alone* crashes down in a wave of electro-punk sentiment and biting hooks. Their latest album saw While She Sleeps expand their core sound, but that's a process they've been pursuing for a while now, and any vague questions about how the new songs might go down live are quickly answered. The immense grooves of *Rainbows* and *Down* – complete with a guest reappearance from Currents' Brian Wille – were always going to slay live, but the nu metal crunch of *Self Hell* itself and the emotional atmospherics of *To The Flowers* are also embraced.

The latter is preceded by frontman Loz Taylor chucking bouquets into the crowd, and when one bunch sticks on the ceiling, an audience member is hoisted up to pluck the blooms free. It's that sort of anything-goes evening, with Loz revelling in his role as ringleader-in-chief. This is an intimate hometown show for the band, and when he asks for members of the crowd to climb on each other's shoulders for *Four Walls* or to break the venue's record for crowdsurfers on *Silence Speaks*, it sparks predictable mayhem. *Sleeps Society* provides the final mass singalong of the evening, and brings this mutual love-in to a suitably celebratory conclusion.

PAUL TRAVERS

Loz Taylor has no need for rose-tinted glasses



While She Sleeps lift bodies and spirits

## LIVE REVIEWS

Graphic Nature: Harvey Freeman brings a personal touch to proceedings



# GRAPHIC NATURE

## FEED THE RHINO / GROVE STREET

REBELLION, MANCHESTER

*Kent's nu metalcore marvels lead a riot in the heart of winter*

**T'WAS THE WINTER season, and all through the city, not a creature was stirring...** apart from a jam-packed Manchester Rebellion hosting three of the loudest, liveliest bands in modern metal. **GROVE STREET**'s combination of thrash and hardcore punk has come a long way from their inception as the *Grand Theft Auto*-inspired Grove Street Families. They hammer through tracks at rapid pace with barely a break between them, keeping the energy high and delivering a lesson on how to open a show.

**FEED THE RHINO**'s last tour was back in 2018, but they're as impeccably tight as they've ever been. The band's mission appears to be to create the rowdiest, most energetic atmosphere possible. Vocalist Lee Tobin is more ferocious than ever, using the crowd as an elevated platform to stomp across while screaming in their delighted faces. This may be the second of only two announced shows for FTR, but let's hope they make a more formal return in 2025.

After releasing two albums in two years and winning the Heavy Music Award for best breakthrough album for their debut, *A Mind Waiting To Die*, **GRAPHIC NATURE** have continued to whip crowds into a frenzy with their impeccable live performances. Tonight

is no different, as vocalist Harvey Freeman launches himself around Rebellion, his long hair flung in the faces of the crowd as he gets up close and personal, emitting visceral screams that fill the venue. As has always been the case for the band, he takes time to discuss mental health awareness, and at this time of year it's especially important to have these discussions. Props to the band for continuing with that message.

Graphic Nature's live show is intense and full-throttle, exceeding the energy of the preceding bands. While they're chaotic and aggressive, the technical prowess, especially of the guitarists, is undeniable, and it's an impressive feat to master your instrument while simultaneously inciting murderous pits. As they hurtle between brutal beatdowns to frantically fast segments and back again while wrestling with their heaviest, darkest, and most emotionally vulnerable material such as *Fractured* and *Blinded*, Graphic Nature impeccably demonstrate why their next award will likely be for best live band.

CHERI FAULKNER



## AND SO I WATCH YOU FROM AFAR

ELECTRIC BRIXTON, LONDON

Over the last 15 years, **And So I Watch You From Afar** have established themselves as one of the most frenetic, high-octane instrumental acts around, making a date with them an essential proposition for music nerds. They open tonight's gig with *Mother Belfast*, the two-part epic centrepiece of new album *Megafauna*, and it's a multifaceted beast that encapsulates the band's blend of playful joie de vivre and cinematic bombast in a little under 10 minutes. The vocal affectations of fan-favourite *Wasps* inject a shot of adrenaline into proceedings, before *A Little Bit Of Solidarity Goes A Long Way* brings the crowd's energy up in line with the quartet. From here, **ASIWYFA** have everyone in the palm of their hands, particularly during a run of early-career highlights – *Beautifuluniversemasterchampion*, *7 Billion People All Alive At Once*, *Set Guitars To Kill* and *Big Things Do Remarkable* – which send the audience wild. Seeing **ASIWYFA** is quite simply one of the most joyous live experiences on the planet today, and it's heartwarming to see people beginning to catch up to them en masse.

REMFRY DEDMAN

## EYEHATEGOD

### GOATWHORE

RELENTLESS GARAGE, LONDON

**GOATWHORE** have been touring relentlessly for decades, and it shows. They're a fearsome live band, and the venue is packed at just after 7pm to bear witness. A savage mix of blackened Hellhammer riffing, razor-sharp Slayer thrashing and some old-fashioned New Orleans magic really manages to get its rusty hooks in. Instead of the usual line-checking and making sure everything is set as should be, three quarters of **EYEHATEGOD** amble on and start jamming a gorgeous, Southern-fried, soulful rock groove that gets heads nodding. Then abruptly they stop and amble off again. When the allotted set time arrives they amble back on and this time frontman Mike Williams starts doing vocal checks. Then they feedback for a few minutes before someone decides that they might as well start and play *Lack Of Almost Everything* before hitting their theme tune: *Masters Of Legalized Confusion*. What follows is an hour of utter filth – Black Flag, Saint Vitus and Discharge filtered through a bottle of out-of-date cough syrup and cheap whiskey. Through *Shoplift*, *Sisterfucker* and *New Orleans Is The New Vietnam*, the granddaddies of sludge are a gloriously dishevelled mess of huge riffs, feedback and broken heads. Some things should never change.

ALASTAIR RIDDELL

The Prodigy: MC Maxim surveys the warzone



# THE PRODIGY

02 BRIXTON ACADEMY, LONDON

*Essex's riotous rock/rave legends overcome yet more hurdles*

**IT FEELS LIKE** it wouldn't be the festive season without The Prodigy playing a series of gigs at Brixton Academy. The music world could have very conceivably lost both of these things over the last few years, so there's an extra pang of relief and gratitude as the kings of dance-rock crossover bullishly strut on to that legendary stage and kick into the Pendulum remix of *Voodoo People* (which is the definitive version, if you're asking). The Prodigy's reputation as a live band is well deserved, and, as they continue straight into a monster version of *Omen*, it feels like it's going to be yet another gig for the ages.

It doesn't quite go that way, though. The momentum is almost immediately stalled when a punter goes down in the pit and has to be carried out.

"It's a warzone down there," barks MC Maxim as we wait, and it takes the band a little while to get back up to speed. New song *Fight!* sounds great, all classic big-beat rhythms and a chant-along chorus, but the crowd's unfamiliarity with it means the response is slightly muted, and a cut-down and mostly vocal-free version of *Firestarter*, used to pay tribute to late, iconic vocalist Keith Flint, doesn't seem to carry the same emotional weight as on their first shows back after his passing.

Still, these grumbles are only here due to the insane standards that The Prodigy have set over the last three decades. Compare this show with basically any other live act in music and it would still wipe the floor with them, and by the second half of their set

Maxim and Rob Holliday strap in for the ride



they're back to their jaw-dropping best. *No Good (Start The Dance)* is still one of the most fantastically intense dance songs of all time; *Their Law* gets Brixton pogoing like it's 1994; the opening riff of *Breathe* inspires one of the loudest crowd singalongs you'll ever hear; and the penultimate, classic dancehall rave mash-up *Out Of Space* has retained every drop of the skanking, booming, bass-heavy allure that it had back in '91.

Both this band and venue have experienced some serious roadblocks over the last few years. In fact, they even have some to surmount this evening, but The Prodigy appear to be able to overcome whatever's thrown at them. This is one seasonal tradition that should definitely be preserved.

STEPHEN HILL

Hey Djamila, how are ya? We can't believe Ithaca are splitting up... "I still feel quite emotional! I didn't really know what to expect; what the reaction would be, if people would be sad or angry about it, or even just like, 'Boo, you suck!' We've known for quite a long time this was happening, and it's been really hard to not be able to talk about it and let people know what's going on. In a way I feel better, but sad."

**What prompted the decision to end the band?**

"There's a whole bunch of reasons, and a lot of it is – a tale as old as time – we can't afford to be in a band. The point of success we reached with our last album was so amazing, beyond what we ever thought we could achieve, but in order for us to reach the next step up, we would have to sacrifice more than we can. Had this happened when we were in our early 20s, great, we could drop everything. Of course, we never could have written *They Fear Us* in our early 20s! But we also don't feel like we are able to put the time into the band that people deserve, and to invest the time we'd need to make another record."

**What band breaking up hit you the hardest?**

"It's funny, a lot of the bands I was really upset about actually ended up getting back together. So firstly, My Chemical Romance – I was devastated! Then, there was this band called Beecher. They were a metalcore band from the UK, and broke up in 2006, which is a really long time ago! They were such a criminally underrated band – all the good bits of The Dillinger Escape Plan and Every Time I Die. They had the potential to be absolutely massive, but never got there, unfortunately."

We're going to have to correct you there – 2006 was only a few years back, and not, as a flier we still

**"WE  
TOTALLED  
THE CAR  
AND HAD TO  
CANCEL THE  
REMAINING  
SHOWS"**



## FIVE MINUTES WITH **DJAMILA AZZOUZ**

Ithaca might be calling it quits after 13 years, but their fiery frontwoman still has some words of wisdom to impart

WORDS: RICH HOBSON



have for a long-gone under-18s night suggests, nearly 20 years ago. "We had this under-18s club night once a month at the Underworld in Camden. We went every single month, and would see all the UK metal bands that were coming up – The Eyes Of

A Traitor, Azriel, Your Demise... all these 2000s bands! It was really amazing – a real community. Without nights like that, I probably wouldn't be here! I wonder if nights like that still exist for kids, or if they just worry they'll all be bussing ketamine in the toilet."

Ah, the decline of youth culture... "Do they even know about [drinking games] Edward Ciderhands? Amy Winehands? There are some things AI and TikTok can't replace, and that is drinking two two-litre bottles of Frosty Jack's and pissing yourself in a field. I think it's responsible for why I am the way I am!"

You've got one more song coming before the band officially call it quits. What can you tell us about it?

"If you tried to encapsulate all of the music Ithaca have written over the years, all of the emotions and sentiments into one song... it'd be this. I can't listen to it without crying!"

Your Instagram is full of fun snaps from tours. What's your favourite tour memory?

"Sam [Chetan-Welsh, guitars] will hate me for this, but there's one we called 'pizzagate', before pizzagate became associated with something else! We were staying at someone's house up North while on tour, and had a pizza the night before. We loaded the van up and Sam put what was left on top of the roof and forgot. He drove away, realised, then tried to reverse and went straight into a tree, totalling our car, and we had to cancel the remaining shows."

What song do you hope people remember Ithaca for?

"*They Fear Us*. It's so difficult to pick one, but it's the one most people hear first, and was the song that kicked things off on that album cycle. Or if you've been following us for a long time, you'll always remember us for the one time we did a very, very bad Hatebreed cover on one tour. If you were there, you're very special!" **H**

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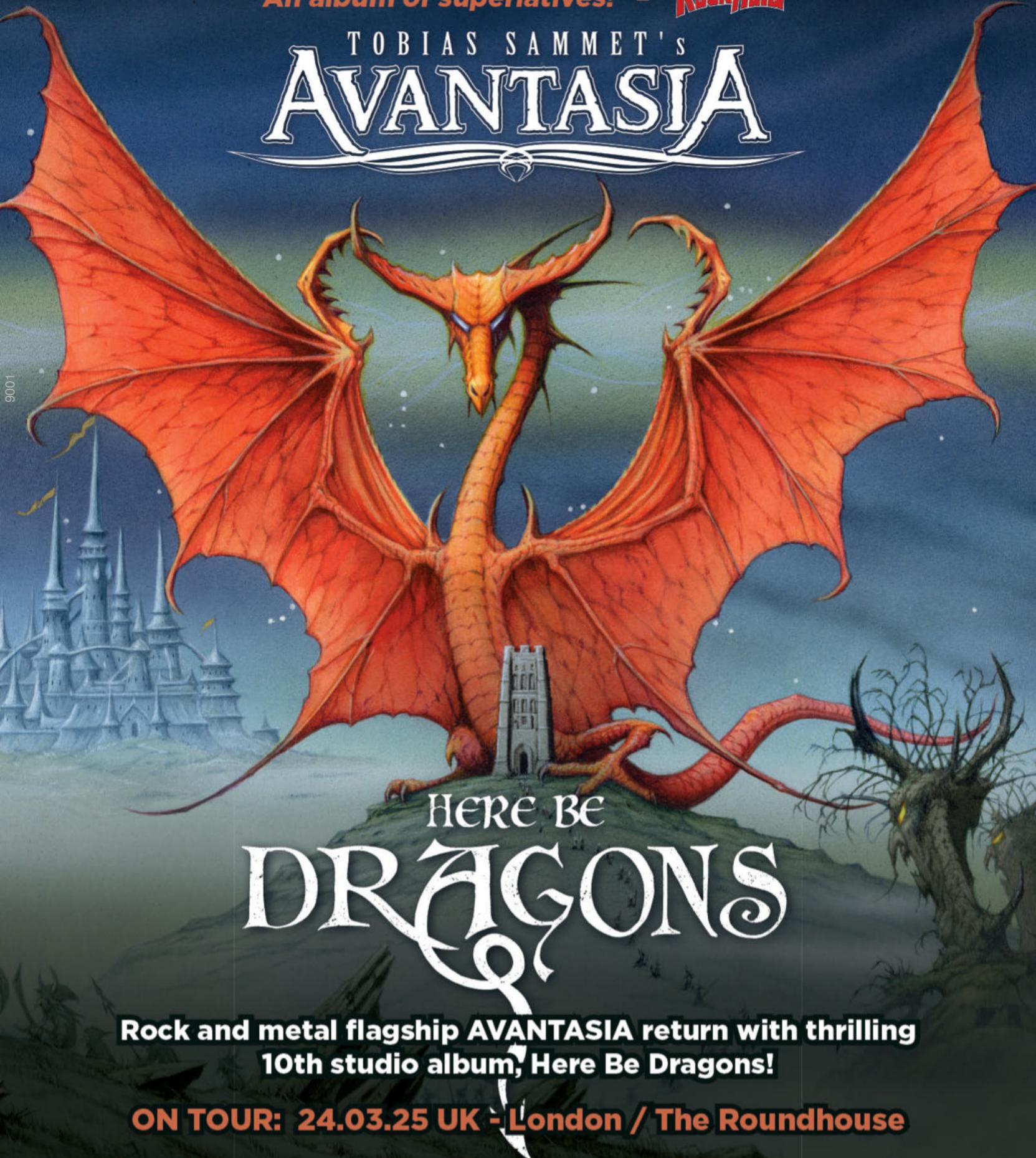
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